RELOADED 2

RETRO GAMING ZINE

Strategy Special!

THE BEST RTS GAMES OF 1997

A look back at the year PC gaming unleashed the most RTS titles

Dungeon Keeper

Retrospective

Featuring

- Myth
- Age of Empires
- Total Annihilation
- Seven Kingdoms
- Dark Reign
- Dark Colony

PLUS! NetStorm • KKnD • WarWind 2 • Earth 2140 • 7th Legion • Outpost 2

RULES MUST BE BROKEN. CATEGORIES MUST BE ERASED. EMPERORS MUST BE OVERTHROWN. THE STATUS QUO MUST BE SPANKED. AND CONTENTMENT MUST BE ROUTINELY TAKEN OUTSIDE AND SMACKED UPSIDE THE HEAD. IT'S A DIRTY JOB, BUT SOMEBODY HAS TO DO IT. AND WE'RE ALL READY TO APPLY FOR THE POSITION.

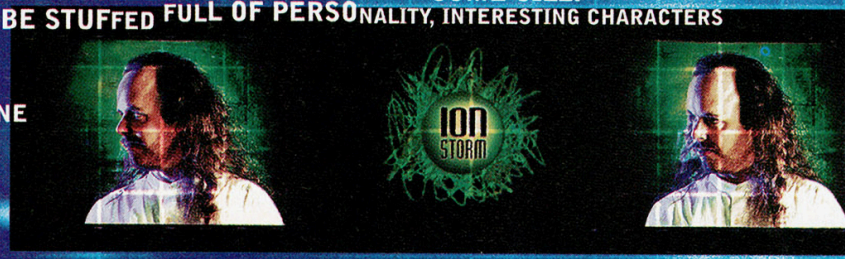
WE'RE **ION STORM**,℠ A BUNCH OF MISFIT, ZEALOT FREAKS WHO TRIED TO REST ON OUR PAST SUCCESSES BUT JUST DIDN'T FIND IT COMFORTABLE. THERE WAS A GAP OUT THERE. A BIG FAT VOID, AND WE WERE HELL-BENT ON FILLING IT. WE HAD ALL LIVED ON THE EDGE, BUT WE WERE READY TO JUMP OFF. SO HERE WE ARE. NEW NAME. NEW IDENTITY. NEW GAMES RATTLING THEIR CAGES, WAITING TO BE LET OUT.

ION STORM

JOHN ROMERO: LONG-HAIRED SMART-ASS KNOWN FOR HIS FAST FERRARI AND HIS UNCANNY ABILITY TO SING THE THEME SONG TO THE SPIDERMAN CARTOON REALLY, REALLY WELL. OH YEAH, THERE WAS ALSO THAT DOOM™ AND QUAKE® THING.

DAIKATANA™ WILL BREAK YOUR ASS DOWN.

TOM HALL: A FUNNY GUY WHO WANTS TO GET ALL TOUCHY-FEELY WITH HIS GAMES. HAS SOME SILLY IDEA THAT COMPUTER GAMES HAVE TO BE STUFFED FULL OF PERSONALITY, INTERESTING CHARACTERS AND **INTERACTIVITY**. IN A PAST LIFE, HE CO-CREATED WOLFENSTEIN 3D, DOOM™ AND RISE OF THE TRIAD, AND WAS ONE OF THE ORIGINAL FOUNDERS OF SOME SMALL COMPANY CALLED ID™.



JERRY O'FLAHERTY: HIGHLY TALENTED PAINT MONKEY WHO GETS INTO EVERYTHING: ART, FILMMAKING, 3-D MODELING AND ANIMATION. NOT TO MENTION A BUNCH OF STUFF HE KEEPS UNDER HIS BED AND WON'T SHOW ANYBODY. HIS JOB DESCRIPTION NOW SAYS HE'S IN CHARGE OF ALL ART. SO IF ANY OF YOU OUT THERE ARE DOING ANYTHING EVEN SLIGHTLY ARTISTIC, IT NOW NEEDS TO BE SUBMITTED TO JERRY FOR HIS APPROVAL.

DOMINION.™ DOPPELGANGER.™ DAM

ION STORM

EIDOS INTERACTIVE

THE EYE OF THE STORM

ION STORM

BOB "POPULAR" WRIGHT: A TOKEN GRAY-HAIR GIVEN THE TITLE CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER TO MAKE HIM FEEL IMPORTANT. KNOWN AROUND THE OFFICE AS "THE FINISHER" AND AS "THE GUY WHO GETS THINGS DONE." BIG IN THE MARKET. HUGE IN EUROPE.

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"WHO WANTS TO REVOLUTIONIZE THE GAMING INDUSTRY IF NOBODY'S WATCHING?!" CAT DADDY/LIZARD KING/ CEO MIKE WILSON: MANIACAL BASTARD WHO MADE IT POSSIBLE FOR ALL AMERICANS TO BUY QUAKE® AND A SLURPEE IN THE SAME PLACE. RUMORED TO BE A PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE FOR THE YEAR 2000 BUT NOT LIKELY TO LIVE MORE THAN ANOTHER YEAR; HE BELIEVES THAT ALL THE BEST PEOPLE DIE WHEN THEY'RE 27.

TODD PORTER: A MANDOLIN-PLAYING, NATTY, GQ TYPE WHO THINKS GAMES SHOULD BE AS STYLISH AS HE IS. GOES AROUND SAYING THINGS LIKE "IN THE GAMING INDUSTRY, THERE IS NO TOMORROW." THEN TURNS AROUND AND DESIGNS THAT WAY. DANGEROUS WITH A HAMMERED DULCIMER WHEN HE'S BEEN OUT DRINKING.

Product Information Number 135

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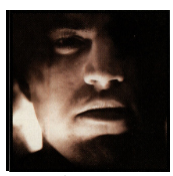
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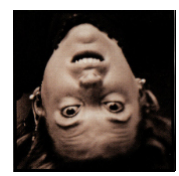

JonOO

Petru Baleanu

Locke

MEANWHILE In 1997

The year is 1997. Men in Black is packing theaters, making aliens and Ray-Bans the height of cool. Radiohead just dropped *OK Computer* and made everyone feel artsy and existential. The Spice Girls and Backstreet Boys are taking over the world. South Park has just debuted on Comedy Central and immediately sends parents into moral panic mode. The internet is starting to feel mainstream, and everyone's rushing out to buy their first personal computer.

It's a great year for games: Diablo (still burning from its late '96 release) and Quake II keep PC gamers glued to their CRT monitors, while Final Fantasy VII turns RPGs into full-blown cinematic events.

Meanwhile, I'm a high school kid rocking checkered pants and the "curtains" hairstyle, channeling my inner Leonardo DiCaprio from Titanic, convinced I'm the coolest thing since Winamp. I've just gotten my first computer, a Pentium II running at a blistering 150 MHz with with a whole gigabyte of hard drive space. I'm on the verge of a personal Big Bang - my world is about to expand and change everything I know.

1997 feels like a year of spectacle and transition. Everything is bigger, bolder, more global. Genres are maturing, the internet is waking up, technology is leaping forward, the future is coming hot - and I'm right there with it.

~ *Dominus.*

A CALL TO ARMS!

Brave soldiers of the real-time strategy wars, we salute you. The faithful mechanical mice that spun their rubber-coated trackballs until they clogged with the dust of battle; the sweat-slicked buttons that endured a billion furious clicks; the tiny, unsung warriors beneath our palms who bore the weight of empires. They died so our armies might march, our fortresses might rise, and our digital banners might fly over conquered landscapes. We built empires one frantic right-click at a time, rallied armies with double-taps, and sacrificed more scroll wheels than we ever admitted. They died so that our bases might live.

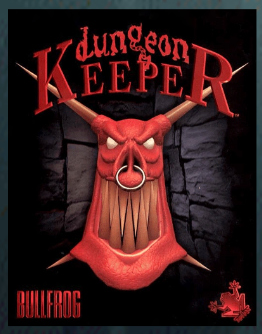
The mouse was our sword, our shield, and our lifeline — transmitting every frantic command with mechanical precision. Left-click, right-click, scroll wheel — the holy trinity of conquest. Whether building bases at breakneck speed, harvesting resources with godlike micromanagement, or sending entire legions to their doom, these humble peripherals carried our ambitions through countless LAN parties, after-school sieges, and long nights where "just one more match" turned into sunrise. They were martyrs of the mouse pad battlefield, and we honor them still.

But how did we get here? How did strategy gaming evolve into the twitchy, empire-spanning spectacle that defined the late '90s? It began with the cold precision of turn-based wargames — cardboard counters and dice giving way to hexes and pixels. Then came the first flickers of real-time tension: no more waiting for your turn, no more leisurely plotting. Suddenly, every second mattered. The seeds were planted earlier — prototyped in early designs, inspired by turn-based war games, shaped by hybrid experiments (think Populous, Herzog Zwei) — but it was Dune II (1992) that cracked the code. Suddenly, the pause button, that slow, brainy deliberation, was obsolete. Something more visceral took over: a living battlefield that demanded split-second decisions, resource juggling, base micromanagement, and a constant eye on your opponent's next move.

By the mid-'90s, real-time strategy wasn't just a niche — it was a revolution. The click became king. Resource gathering, base building, and fog of war transformed strategy from an abstract puzzle into a living, breathing battlefield. What once played out in slow motion now unfolded at breakneck speed. Every decision carried weight, every slip of the mouse could mean defeat.

So as we gear up to review the big RTS releases of 1997, think of this year as a crucible where mechanics, scale, sound, and ambition all collided. It was the moment when RTS design matured, where genre conventions solidified, and where every click echoed with the promise of empire. As we march into this issue, reviewing the titans of that fateful year, remember the sacrifice of those noble mice, the late-night duels, the battles won and lost with a hundred frantic clicks per minute. 1997 was the year strategy truly went real-time, and we're here to relive the glory. ■

THE BEST RTS GAMES OF 1997



DUNGEON KEEPER

EDITOR'S RELOADED CHOICE

Developed by BULLFROG and published by EA

keeperfx.net

Retrospective by **DOMINUS**

AVAILABLE ON GOG.COM

PRESERVED GOOD OLD GAME BY GOG

> "I wanted to create a game where being evil was just a little bit more fun."
>
> *- Peter Molyneux*

BEWARE!

The Lord of the land approaches!

If you just heard that in a deep, velvet voice echoing in your skull, congrats - you're one of us. One of the many twisted minds shaped by Dungeon Keeper, Bullfrog's brilliant and beautifully evil strategy classic. Released in 1997, it was a game that didn't just ask you to think outside the box - it made you build the damn box underground, fill it with torture chambers, and slap minions until they loved you for it.

Dungeon Keeper wasn't just a game - it was a rebellion. At a time when most fantasy titles were obsessed with sword-swinging heroes and dragon-slaying valor, Peter Molyneux and his team at Bullfrog said, "*Nah. Let's let players be the bad guy. And not just any bad guy - a malevolent, power-hungry, dungeon-dwelling tyrant with a literal Hand of Evil.*" A game where you didn't save kingdoms, you corrupted them. Where knights were vermin and torture chambers were essential infrastructure. It was moody. It was messy. It was magical. And it's never truly been beaten. Dungeon Keeper flipped the dungeon crawler on its head, and it did so with such devilish charm, technical brilliance, and outright wickedness that no one's really matched it since.

Peter Molyneux wasn't new to genre-defining ideas. Populous, Theme Park, Syndicate — Bullfrog had a reputation for bold concepts and creative madness. But Dungeon Keeper wasn't just another quirky management sim. It was an act of rebellion, a technical experiment, and an emotional rollercoaster for the developers behind it. The early prototypes looked nothing like the final game. Initially envisioned as a much simpler grid-based management sim, the project evolved dramatically after Molyneux insisted on a more organic feel, more tactile, more immersive, and more alive. The idea of the "*Hand of Evil*" came surprisingly late in development and was inspired by Molyneux's love for direct player interaction. He didn't want a mere cursor. He wanted something that felt like power. Bullfrog's small team of designers, artists, and coders found themselves in the deep end. They built a custom engine from scratch to accommodate terrain deformation, AI pathfinding, and lighting effects. This engine allowed walls to crumble in real time and let units dynamically interact with the evolving environment. At a time when many strategy games were grid-locked and rigid, Dungeon Keeper felt chaotic and alive.

> "We were changing things right up to the very end."

Internal documents from Bullfrog reveal that team members were often working around the clock, sleeping in the office, surviving on caffeine and curry takeout. According to a now-archived Gamespot interview, Molyneux overhauled the user interface just weeks before gold master, prompting a brutal crunch period that nearly burned out the entire studio. One major breakthrough came when the team realized that each creature could be given semi-autonomous behaviors. Instead of hard-coding actions, they built simple needs-based AI routines—creatures would sleep when tired, eat when hungry, and grow discontent if ignored. It made the dungeon feel like a twisted ant farm, and it introduced emergent gameplay that was unheard of in '97.

Another huge gamble was Possession Mode. The ability to jump into the body of your minions and see the dungeon in first-person was revolutionary. Molyneux believed it would strengthen immersion and make players care about their dungeon not just as a layout—but as a lived-in space. It also pushed the development team to optimize the dungeon from both top-down and first-person perspectives, doubling the workload. The last few months were a blur. Sound designer Russell Shaw worked overtime to finish the ambient soundtrack, while voice actor Richard Ridings recorded most of the narrator lines in a single session—taking direction from Molyneux in real time. Many of the lines were improvised or rewritten on the spot to hit the right tone between menace and deadpan humor.

The team pulled through. What emerged wasn't just another RTS. It was a layered, satirical, sometimes unstable but always fascinating beast. A game with soul, teeth, and an attitude. ▶

Architecture of Evil

At its core, Dungeon Keeper is a hybrid of real-time strategy, resource management, and god game. But more than anything, it's about control — control over territory, over creatures, and over your own growing lust for power. Every mechanic is built around reinforcing your role as an unseen tyrant whose invisible hand shapes the fate of all within the dungeon.

Players begin each level deep underground, surrounded by solid earth. Their first task? Claim territory. You deploy your loyal Imps to dig out tunnels and uncover gold seams, then begin constructing rooms that attract and serve your monstrous inhabitants. It's a careful balance of economy and ecology: build a Lair for sleeping, a Hatchery for food, a Training Room for leveling up, a Workshop for crafting doors and traps, and more sinister additions like Torture Chambers, Graveyards, and the lightning-charged Temple.

The AI systems driving your minions are deceptively complex. Every creature has its own routines, preferences, and triggers. Warlocks prefer to study in the Library, Bile Demons need a well-stocked Hatchery, and Skeletons, born from tortured heroes, exist only to serve. The infamous Horned Reaper (or "Horny") is a ticking time bomb: immensely powerful but easily enraged. He'll attack allies if bored or mistreated, yet is nearly unstoppable in battle. Managing your creatures is a game of carrot and stick, literally. Slapping minions (with your Hand of Evil) can motivate them or discipline unruly behavior, but overdo it and they'll rebel. The resource economy is another cornerstone of gameplay. Gold pays wages, builds rooms, and powers spells. Run out, and your minions go unpaid, leading to strikes, desertion, or worse. Efficient mining and room placement become vital. You learn to prioritize: Do you invest early in research to unlock powerful spells, or rush enemy dungeons with brute force?

> "A deliciously dark descent into dungeon management."
> – Computer Gaming World, October 1997

And then there's Possession Mode. At any moment, you can dive into the body of any minion and experience the dungeon through their eyes. This wasn't just a gimmick — it changed how players related to the world. From the ground level, you could appreciate the terrifying beauty of your domain: the flickering torches, the damp stone, the chaos of battle. You felt inside the game.

Enemy heroes, righteous knights, thieves, monks, periodically invade your domain, challenging your defenses. Later levels introduce rival Dungeon Keepers, escalating the conflict to a strategic arms race. Every room you capture, every trap you place, and every creature you nurture becomes a cog in your war machine. Victory is declared only when all enemies are vanquished and your dominance is absolute. But even then, your narrator

reminds you that this is merely one conquest. The world above still awaits corruption.

One of the most striking aspects of Dungeon Keeper is its visual identity. While many contemporaries favored clean fantasy aesthetics filled with gleaming armor and noble castles, Dungeon Keeper embraced filth, darkness, and decay with unapologetic glee. Every texture, animation, and particle effect reinforced the notion that this was a place where goodness had been throttled into submission.

Bullfrog's artists built a world that felt tangibly subterranean. Walls oozed with damp grime, lairs were strewn with bones and ragged bedding, and rooms like the Torture Chamber or Graveyard were grotesque works of twisted creativity. The architecture changed subtly depending on which rooms you placed, there was no copy-paste design. The Temple, for example, emitted glowing runes and strange chants, whereas the Training Room thudded with the repetitive rhythm of minions hammering punching bags.

Creatures themselves were designed with personality in every pixel. The Bile Demon was grotesque but endearing, with his slow wobble and thunderous flatulence. The Horned Reaper exuded menace from his glowing eyes to his oversized scythe. Even lowly Imps had their charm, scurrying to and fro like dutiful worker ants with exaggerated animations that made them oddly lovable.

UI design deserves special mention. Health bars dripped like blood, and tooltips often carried a mischievous tone. Everything in the game's presentation, its font choices, iconography, and even menu layout, felt like it came from the mind of a sadistic architect.

"We wanted the player to feel that even the interface belonged in this dark world."

- Bullfrog artist, Retro Gamer UK, Issue 268

Lighting played a huge role in atmosphere. Torches flickered dynamically, casting shadows that shifted with player movement. Possession Mode amplified this even further, when you entered a creature's view, you saw a dim, colored world tinted by the minion's traits (greens for Goblins, reds for Horny). Sound and sight were synced in a way that made the dungeon not just a map, but a mood. This commitment to atmospheric cohesion created one of the most memorable visual identities of the 90s. Even in a screenshot, Dungeon Keeper is instantly recognizable.

Symphony of Evil

If the visuals of Dungeon Keeper carved out its underworld, it was the audio that gave it a pulse. The game's sound design and music, largely the work of Russell Shaw, didn't just complement the gameplay, they elevated it into an atmospheric experience that was deeply immersive, unsettling, and wickedly satisfying. The ambient soundtrack in Dungeon Keeper was unlike the melodic, orchestral scores of its fantasy contemporaries. It leaned heavily on low, brooding drones, metallic clangs, echoing groans, and subtle industrial hums. Rather than constantly asserting itself, the music lingered like a presence, creeping under your skin as you dug deeper into the earth. It wasn't music you could hum, but it was music you could feel.

Sound effects were incredibly detailed for the era. Each room had its own soundscape: the rhythmic thudding of training Goblins, the bubbling churn of the Hatchery cauldrons, the unnerving moans from the Torture Chamber.

Bullfrog Productions Ltd was founded in 1987 by Les Edgar and Peter Molyneux. Their team also comprised of legendary designers Gary Carr, Glenn Corpes and Paul McLaughlin. Actively developing games until 2001, the studio released a total of 22 titles still fondly remembered by millions all over the world. The Bullfrog Productions team created new genres, invented new game mechanics, advanced game making technology, pioneered game making processes and predicted the games industry business models of the future. Bullfrog Productions played a key role in defining what modern computer games are.

The story starts with a case of mistaken identity. A young Peter Molyneux and his good friend Les Edgar started an import/export business, selling Baked Beans to the Middle East. That company was called Taurus Impact Systems and their name would prove to be their greatest strength. When a letter arrived from the American computer manufacturer Commodore, it was clear to Peter that they had been mistaken for a software developer of a similar name. Ever the opportunist, Peter decided to take them up on their offer anyway and soon enough, he was in possession of some complimentary Commodore hardware and a work order to develop some business software. Once that project finished, Taurus won a contract to port the game 'Druid II: Enlightenment' to the Commodore Amiga and Bullfrog Productions was born.

These weren't mere background noises - they were feedback loops, signaling efficiency, urgency, or chaos. When a boulder trap triggered or a lightning spell cracked, the effects hit hard and loud, reinforcing their impact.

Voiced by the incomparable Richard Ridings, the Dungeon Keeper narrator became an icon in his own right. His rich, sardonic baritone delivered every message with malevolent glee. He didn't just inform you, he mocked you, praised your cruelty, and chuckled when heroes met grisly ends. Even mundane updates became deliciously evil: "*You have tunneled into a new area*," or "*Your creatures are becoming angry*," became catchphrases for an entire generation of players.

"We wanted a voice that oozed with condescension, amusement, and subtle threat all at once."

- Peter Molyneux

Ridings recorded his lines in a matter of days, but the performance he delivered still resonates decades later. His dry wit and theatrical timing gave Dungeon Keeper a uniquely dark humor, turning the player into a complicit villain with a smirk. It was one of the first games to fully embrace voice as character, not just information, and it worked brilliantly.

Every sound in the game reinforced the fantasy of being an evil overlord. The wet slap of your Hand of Evil striking a lazy Imp. The screams of fallen heroes in the Torture Chamber. The ominous boom when a rival keeper cast a powerful spell. It was all part of a sensory tapestry that made the dungeon feel alive.

"The audio wasn't just there to fill space. It told the story, built the world, and made you feel something."

- Russell Shaw, composer and sound designer

Dungeon Keeper's soundscape was a masterclass in restraint and tone. It never overplayed its hand. Instead, it built an atmosphere you didn't just play, you inhabited.

Legacy of Evil

Dungeon Keeper wasn't just a game, it was a statement. At a time when gaming narratives were still dominated by heroes, quests, and moral binaries, Bullfrog delivered a title that made evil not just fun, but deeply satisfying. It asked players to revel in their cruelty, to experiment with punishment, to delight in corruption, and it did so with a wink and a grin. The game was a critical and commercial success. It sold over half a million copies within its first year and received praise from outlets like

Peter Molyneux

Lead designer

One of gaming's most ambitious minds, Molyneux co-founded Bullfrog Productions in 1987, where he carved a legacy as a pioneer of the "god game" genre with titles like Populous, Syndicate, and Theme Park.

By the mid-90s, Molyneux had grown frustrated with heroic clichés and longed to flip the script. His solution? Let players be the bad guy. Dungeon Keeper was born from that irreverent impulse and soon became one of Bullfrog's most daring projects. Molyneux served as both creative director and executive producer, shaping the game's twisted humor, subversive mechanics, and overarching philosophy: *"It's good to be bad."* Molyneux left Bullfrog shortly after Dungeon Keeper's release, going on to found Lionhead Studios and create games like Black & White and Fable. Yet to many fans, Dungeon Keeper remains his most devilishly perfect idea — ambitious, chaotic, and utterly original. Known for both his boundless creativity and infamous overpromises, Molyneux was the kind of designer who dreamed in mechanics and metaphors.

Computer Gaming World, PC Gamer, and Edge. But its influence would stretch far beyond its sales figures. Its biggest contribution? Tone. Dungeon Keeper helped normalize the idea that games could embrace dark humor and villainous perspectives without alienating players. It walked the tightrope between comedy and cruelty with elegance, influencing later titles like Overlord, Evil Genius, Stubbs the Zombie, and even The Sims in subtle ways (Peter Molyneux would go on to create The Sims' spiritual sibling Black & White). The game's legacy is particularly felt in the realm of management and god games. The idea of semi-autonomous agents with needs and quirks, something Dungeon Keeper handled remarkably well—inspired design philosophies that found homes in games like Prison Architect, and Dwarf Fortress. Many developers from the Bullfrog team would move on to form Lionhead Studios and later Two Point Studios, continuing to

shape the simulation genre for years.

"We weren't trying to make something evil. We were trying to make something honest. Something that reflected how messy, selfish, and hilarious management really is."

Of course, not every part of the legacy is pristine. The EA-published mobile remake in 2014 became infamous for its aggressive monetization and lack of depth. It was widely condemned by fans and critics alike as a betrayal of the original's spirit. Ironically, that failure only reinforced how beloved the original game remained.

"We had a feature where, if you were playing late at night and were connected to a printer, the invading hero would randomly spam it with threatening messages along the lines of *"I'm coming to get you, you evil despot."* Conceptually rather fun, but in practice a little distracting in an office environment. One night during testing, EA's printers started going mental across the world, with some people in the US thinking they were getting death threats."

- Simon Carter

Today, Dungeon Keeper is remembered as a cult classic, a game that was ahead of its time in both mechanics and tone. It still holds up, thanks in part to GOG and modern emulators, and is often cited in retrospectives, design analysis, and YouTube essays as a landmark in interactive villainy.

Even the original game's voice lines have taken on a life of their own. "*Your creatures are under attack*," "*It is payday*," and "*You have claimed a Portal*" have become meme-worthy relics of a golden era of PC gaming.

Its sequel, Dungeon Keeper 2, released in 1999, improved visuals and interface but never quite captured the raw charm and innovation of its predecessor. Fans still debate which is superior, but there's little question which one left the deeper scar on gaming history. Dungeon Keeper didn't just open a portal into Hell, it invited us to build a home there. ■

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True 3D terrain.
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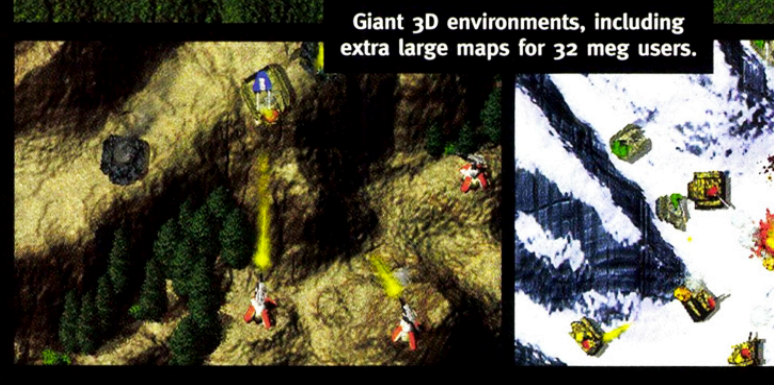

Giant 3D environments, including extra large maps for 32 meg users.

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RATING PENDING RP CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Designed for Microsoft Windows 95

a GT Interactive company

Take out a radar tower to cripple the enemy's intelligence.
Launch an invasion from the sea.
The forest provides perfect cover for surprise invasions.
Control the high ground.
Bombard the enemy from the safety of the sea.
3D tanks move smoothly over the hill as they move into position.

Over 150 units and 50 missions.

Full complement of land, air and sea units.

Extensive multi-player support including 'Watch and Join modes'.

TOTAL ANNIHILATION

EDITOR'S RELOADED CHOICE

AVAILABLE ON GOG.COM

Developed by CAVEDOG and published by HUMONGOUS tauniverse.com

Replay by **DOMINUS**

"What began as a conflict over the transfer of consciousness from flesh to machines escalated into a war which has decimated a million worlds. The CORE and the ARM have all but exhausted the resources of a galaxy in their struggle for domination. Both sides now crippled beyond repair, the remnants of their armies continue to battle on ravaged planets, their hatred fuelled by over four thousand years of total war. This is a fight to the death. For each side, the only acceptable outcome is the complete elimination of the other."

"Total Annihilation was one of the PC's most forward-thinking strategy games - it threw out all the arbitrary conventions of the genre and created something more like a simulation. The result was a game plenty of PC gamers still consider unsurpassed." - Chris Taylor

It's 2 AM, my CRT monitor is humming like a tired gunship, and I'm watching a single artillery shell arc across half the map before annihilating an enemy fusion reactor. It felt surgical. Cinematic. That was Total Annihilation in a nutshell: a symphony of scale, strategy, and spectacle.

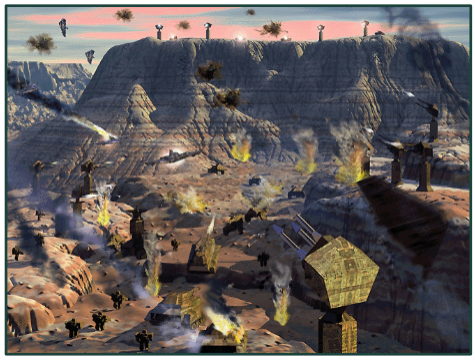
Total Annihilation, the brainchild of Chris Taylor and Cavedog Entertainment, wasn't just another RTS. It was a revolution in silicon and steel, a future war simulator where artillery screamed across valleys, radar towers scanned the horizon, and giant walking death machines shattered the earth beneath them. And somehow, all of it ran smoothly on a Pentium II.

The story begins with humanity's greatest achievement becoming its greatest tragedy. Faced with mortality, humans developed the technology to transfer consciousness into machines. Those who embraced mechanical immortality became the Core, while those who clung to biological existence formed the Arm (originally "Ancient Replicant Memory," later reinterpreted as simply "Arm").

For four millennia, these two factions have waged total war across the galaxy. Entire worlds have been stripped of resources, planets reduced to metal graveyards, and star systems abandoned as the conflict consumes everything in its path. By the time players enter this universe, the war has become self-perpetuating, a machine of destruction that has forgotten its original purpose.

The genius of Total Annihilation's storytelling lies not in complex cutscenes or elaborate character development, but in environmental narrative. Each battlefield tells a story of devastation. Metal worlds speak to Core's complete rejection of organic life, while the pockmarked terrain of former garden worlds shows the cost of endless conflict. The very resource system reinforces this theme - you literally build your war machine from the bones of previous battles.

The campaign missions themselves were elegantly simple - destroy this, defend that, capture the other - but each took place against this backdrop of cosmic futility. You weren't just winning battles; you were perpetuating a cycle of destruction that had already consumed countless worlds. The Arm's campaign culminates in the destruction of Core Prime, its homeworld and command nexus. The Core's campaign, on the other hand, ends with the final extinction of all organic life. Pick your poison. And yet, after all that, the war doesn't end. Because in



The Core Contingency, we learn there was a failsafe. A planet. A machine. A backup plan.

Unlike its contemporaries, TA didn't shackle itself to sprite-based limitations. Units were fully 3D (polygonal in 1997!), and terrain wasn't just window dressing, it mattered. Elevation, line of sight, firing arcs, and physics-driven projectiles meant you actually had to think about positioning. At the heart of TA's brilliance was its unit design. Over 150 distinct units across the two warring factions - Core and Arm, each with their own role, from stealthy radar jammers to hulking Krogoth experimentals. Then there was the scale. While other RTS games of the era featured dozens of units, Total Annihilation threw hundreds into the mix without breaking a sweat. There is no supply system that limits your unit count, save for a hard cap set for the match. The result was battles that felt truly epic, industrial wars of attrition that could span continents.

"I always believed that RTS was a true strategy game, and having played a bunch of chess, I felt there was a place to insert some of that," Taylor explains. The Commander wasn't just another unit—it was your chess king, your avatar, your lifeline. Armed with the devastating D-Gun that could vaporize any single target, the Commander was simultaneously your most powerful asset and your greatest vulnerability.

The 3D terrain wasn't just visual flair; it was functionally integrated into gameplay. Hills provided cover, elevation affected weapon ranges, and the line of sight was calculated in true 3D space. All of this takes place on 3D worlds where you can hide behind terrain so that Big Bertha ranging out to hit you can be thwarted if you're in the lee of a hill or some structure. The physics engine was equally impressive. Projectiles followed realistic ballistic arcs, and the game's famous "wreckage" system meant destroyed units became salvageable metal deposits. Every explosion, every shot, every movement felt weighty and consequential.

From the moment you first controlled your Commander, Total Annihilation made it clear this wasn't your typical RTS. Resource management was continuous, not harvested. You didn't click on crystals; you set up an economy. Energy and metal were the lifeblood of your empire, requiring infrastructure, efficiency, and forward planning. It made base-building an art form and strategic

positioning a science. Instead of buying new units for a lump sum, your resources decreased steadily as you manufactured new death bots in your factories. It was elegant, realistic, and utterly unforgiving to players used to the safety net of resource stockpiles.

And that music... Jeremy Soule's orchestral score swelled during climactic battles like you were in a mech-drenched Wagner opera. No discussion of Total Annihilation is complete without mentioning the game's orchestral soundtrack. While other RTS games relied on MIDI tracks or simple ambient loops, Total Annihilation featured a full 70-minute orchestral score that dynamically shifted based on the action. The music didn't just accompany the gameplay - it elevated it to something approaching art.

The game's complexity extended to its balance issues. Not strictly well balanced between the two factions (ARM vs CORE... in which ARM is better by most measures). ***"We never intended for one side to be more powerful than the other,"*** Taylor admits. The solution came through continuous content updates - a practice that would become standard in modern gaming but was revolutionary in 1997.

"It evolved from a bunch of experiences that I had while developing games for most of my childhood, but there was a moment, while I was playing the original Command & Conquer where I saw many of the ideas coalesce," Chris Taylor recalls. That moment of clarity would birth one of the most influential RTS games ever made, a title that arrived at the perfect intersection of technological capability and creative ambition.

Total Annihilation shared 1997 with games like Age of Empires and Dark Reign before StarCraft came out in 1998, but while its contemporaries refined existing formulas, Total Annihilation rewrote the rulebook entirely. Where others saw limitations, Chris Taylor saw possibilities.

Today, Total Annihilation remains playable and relevant. The influence is undeniable. Supreme Commander, Planetary Annihilation, and countless other games have attempted to capture Total Annihilation's magic, but they have never quite gotten there... The devs always wanted to both capture some of the original while moving beyond and making something new... but which also never left me satisfied. ■

Chris Taylor
Lead designer

"Total "Total Annihilation was a game I designed for myself. It was like everything I wanted in an RTS game, I put into Total Annihilation. Units could shoot while they moved, real physics, the fact that stuff was more emergent - based on rule system rather than hardcoded. So there's a lot of things that I really wanted to do. But as I went along and as the stakes got higher and as the games got more complex and the teams got bigger, I started thinking to myself: well, maybe I should be designing this game more for the people who are playing it, and not myself. Which I think actually works well. I mean if you talk to some very successful developers and teams, they say "Oh yeah, we sit around for hours and days, and we try out all these different ideas and gather all this feedback, and we do a lot more of that kind of research."

And so I went more in that direction. And what happens is you get games that can actually sell more. So Supreme Commander sold more units with its somewhat less surprising and quirky game design than Total Annihilation did. So it was kind of true; if you wanted to make a game that people enjoy and wanted to play, you had to pay more attention to what they thought, what they wanted to do. So it works".

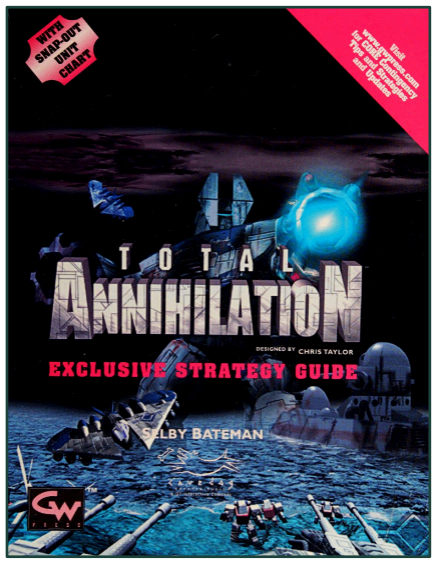
Source: PC Gamer

BEHIND THE SCENES

With Ron Gilbert & Chris Taylor

Ever wondered what goes through the minds of game developers as they scheme to bring you the next big thing in computer entertainment? Here's your chance to find out more about what TA producer Ron Gilbert and TA designer Chris Taylor think about their game, the creative process of game design, the computer game industry, and the future of computer gaming.

The following interview was first printed in the **Total Annihilation: Exclusive Strategy Guide** by **Selby Bateman** published by GWPress in 1997.



It was just about two years ago, in the fall of 1995, when Ron Gilbert and Chris Taylor first began discussing the ideas that would become Total Annihilation. At that time, Taylor had been a successful developer of sports games for Electronic Arts, Gilbert, who had developed such computer game classics as The Secret of Monkey Island, had been working at Humongous Entertainment, a very successful publisher of children's entertainment software, but was leaving to join in a new venture, Woodinville, Washington, headquarters not far from Seattle. Gilbert and Taylor built the Cavedog team that completed Total Annihilation in August 1997-on schedule! This interview took place during the frantic hours shortly before the game's release.

Bateman: Now that you've put two years of work into Total Annihilation, what's your feeling about it and what do you like best?

Taylor: I'm really happy with it. It's everything we expected and I'm thrilled with the results. I do believe we've achieved a dream goal. There are so many little details and interrelationships that I love. For example, just today we added a new feature: a construction vehicle can guard any other construction vehicle, and when you order the first construction vehicle to build something, the other one automatically helps.

Gilbert: What I like best is that Total Annihilation really plays very differently than the other strategy games. We didn't just take a Warcraft or a Command & Conquer and come up with a bunch of new units, which seems to be what a lot of other people are doing. We added a lot of very fundamental game play dynamics that are different from what other people are doing. You know, you get into a big multiplayer game of TA and it plays a lot differently than Command & Conquer does, and I really like that.

Bateman: Let's talk about the multiplayer option. I know that you want multiplayer Total

Annihilation to offer something different from other multiplayer games.

Taylor: Yes, we have state-of-the-art Internet technology and some of the smartest guys in the business working on our stuff. For example, when we were looking at allied play, we said "Why should we only let players give units to their allies? Why should we restrict a person like that?" Instead, we made it so that allies can give anything they want to anybody they want. We just give the player that choice. You hit the Tab key, and there's a Share button to let you give mapping information, energy and metal, or units-three areas.

Gilbert: Most of that kind of choice came from Chris and me sitting down and saying, "What about this feature?" And then we'd argue about it for an hour, and then realize, "Why are we arguing about this? Let's just put them in." So, anything you came up with we would just stick in there and let people turn it on and turn it off. Why should we decide if you can give resources or not. We'll just allow it. Why should we decide if you want a right-click interface or a left-click interface? Let's just give players both. So, what we tried to do is anything we thought was a good idea, rather than picking the way it should be, we just left it up to the player.

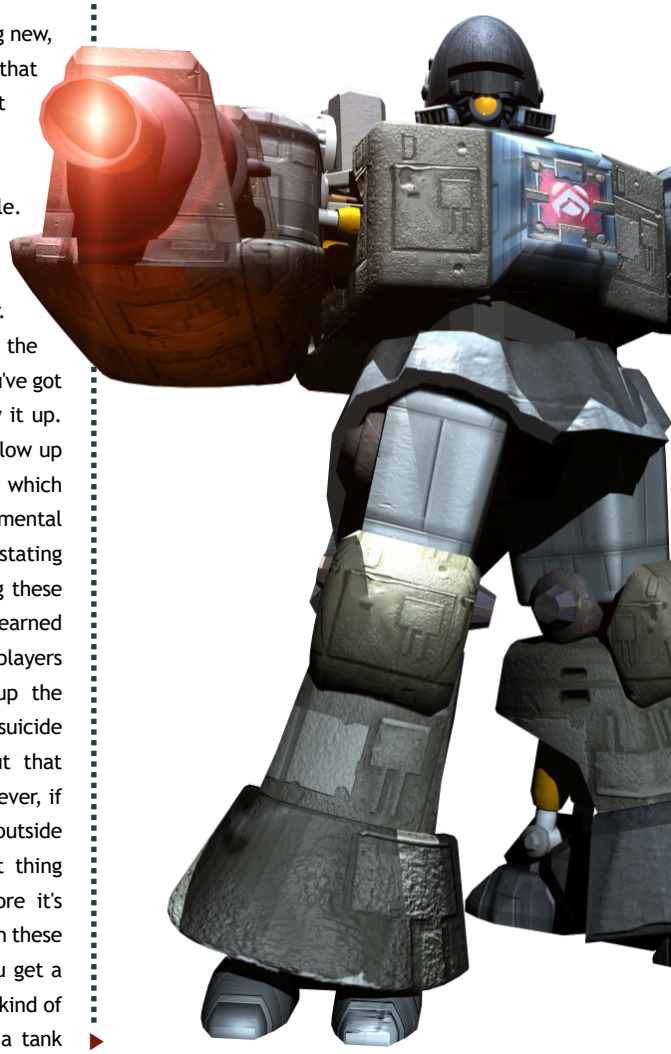
Bateman: Some of the multiplayer maps require 32 MB of memory to play, and I know you want even bigger maps.

Taylor: Yeah, I'd love to see people get into some worlds that are so huge they have gigantic weekend-long tournaments, attracting lots of pros while these guys are slugging it out. There's a Watch Mode that allows a fourth "person" to observe three-player games. For example, through a mechanism we have for the Internet, a producer could produce a show of the game, moving a camera around, and somebody would be broadcasting that over the Internet, with people watching. One person, the producer, would be deciding where the camera would point to. I'll bet we can push it to five-four people playing and one watching. The Internet is exciting like that because it can give a much bigger audience to tournaments of TA.

Gilbert: That's one of the reasons I'm excited about our multiplayer stuff and being able to ally with others. I'm definitely a defensive TA player. I tend to spend a lot of time building up my base, and building up my defenses, which is probably why I lose a whole lot. I tend to become very, very entrenched. And I want to be able to get to my kind of life. But in the end I know that just goes and conquers land. It's really hard for me to get up so people where you get one guy sits there and builds up, and will be the defensive guy, the other guy can go out and conquer territory-and be able to very quickly toss resources and units back and forth between the two people to build up an attack army. In other games, like Red Alert, when you're allied with somebody it's really like you're two separate armies but you're just not fighting. And the way we thought about allies in TA is it should really be one army with two different players.

Bateman: As people play TA, they're finding new, creative ways of using some of the units that help the game play evolve. How is that happening?

Taylor: Crawling bombs are a good example. They're units you can build that go across the world, and they crawl into your base and over the bottom of the ocean floor. They crawl at a really slow rate, and over the highest mountains and blow up. Well, if you've got five cents worth of defense, you can blow it up. The bomb will take out an area, but it'll blow up outside the range of, say, the laser tower, which we designed so you can build a fundamental defense to protect against this very devastating unit. What people were doing was sending these bombs in to other players' bases until they learned to build defenses for them. In response, players took air transports and began picking up the crawling bombs and flying them in as suicide bombs. Air transports are expensive. But that technique is a very effective weapon. However, if you build an air defense perimeter that is outside of your base at least a half-screen, that thing won't get anywhere near your base before it's taken out. People are going to move through these same changes as they play. Every time you get a new group of players, they go through this kind of evolution. For example, you can pick up a tank



and set it on an aircraft carrier. Maybe your transport ship went down and you want to stack a couple of these tanks and have them offshore to move in. People will discover that, "I can set that down on the deck of a ship!" Yeah, you can!

Bateman: Ron, when you started Cavedog, what was your goal for the company?

Gilbert: I wanted a company or a division in which we could do the non-children's games. My vision for the whole thing was that I wanted to create the type of environment that really good designers and programmers and artists could come to and build the vision that they had for games without a lot of bureaucratic stuff going on. I've worked at other companies, as has Chris, where you get a lot of-for lack of a better word-suits running around. You know, they've done a marketing survey and decided that green aliens are not this month, so you've got to do green alien games. I wanted to create an environment that was run by people who love games. Shelley and I do, we're big gamers.

Bateman: How did the Cavedog name come about?

Gilbert: Chris and I were trying to come up with a name, and nothing was really sticking. One day, it was either Chris or Clayton who came in and said, "How about Frozen TA Entertainment?" And we said, "Wow! We really like that! Let's live with that for awhile." So we lived with that for a couple of weeks, and we all liked it. And then Chris came in and said "How about Cavedog Entertainment?" And we really liked that, too. But had the people liked Cavedog and had the people liked Frozen TA, and we went around and around and around. Finally we had to make a decision. So, I pulled a penny out of my pocket and said, "I'm going to flip this coin. Heads it's Frozen TA Entertainment, tails it's Cavedog Entertainment. Let's all agree that we're going to live with whatever the penny says." So, I flipped the coin and it came up Cavedog. Not one scrap of marketing research. I'm proud of that!

Bateman: So, Chris, where did you come up with "Cavedog?"

Taylor: I was working away on TA. It was the only title we were working on then. Ron said we needed to come up with a name. I worried about it the most, and came up with so many names, dozens and dozens of names. I'd be driving down streets looking at signs, and I was on this kick with Frozen Yak. An animal kick. Well, I woke up one morning, and Cavedog popped into my head. I thought no one would like it. So I held onto it for awhile, and then told Ron and others, and they liked it.

Bateman: When Chris approached you, did you already have in mind the type of game you wanted to do first?

Gilbert: No, not at all. I didn't want Cavedog-and I still don't want Cavedog-to be pegged down to a particular genre of games. I want to be able to do lots of different things. So, when Chris came to me with the game, I hadn't been thinking of something like this to begin with.

Bateman: Is there a certain number of games that you'd like Cavedog to publish each year?

Gilbert: I don't think it's really so much a number of games. Just making sure that we're always producing really good stuff that we believe in. I don't want to get into a situation where we're just trying to get bigger and bigger and bigger, and we're putting out junk to have market share. If we come out with a bunch of games one year and not very many the next year, just because of how many good ideas there were, that would be OK with me.

Bateman: Chris, one of your goals was to minimize the kind of micro-management in TA that in some previous games becomes tedious and frustrating.

Taylor: The analogy is that of a general in a war; and we're trying to put you in that position. Think of Patton. Patton never had to go back and make sure there was enough steel or so if the launch was coming. If you're a general and you're doing your job out in the field, you just worry about how to use the tanks. We set it up for the economy to be continual-a continual income of energy and metal.

Bateman: How did the soundtrack to TA come about?

Taylor: When I think of war, I can't get Apocalypse Now out of my head. You know, Wagner's Ride of the Valkyries. It pushed a button; that charge; that feel; that rush. I told Jeremy Soule, TA's composer, that I wanted that feel in the game. For him it was some of the most difficult music he had ever composed. But, I kept pushing, and got the best out of him. He did a great job. We had the Northwest Sinfonia record the soundtrack. As the action in the game changes, the music shifts. There's battle music and then there's more, you know, base-building music. It doesn't switch immediately; the tempo and music transition as game play changes.

Bateman: Now that the game is out, will there be add-on packs for TA in the future?

Gilbert: We're building a secondary team that will do all the add-on packs; they'll be dedicated to doing nothing but supporting Total Annihilation throughout the next year. Chris is going to go on and build Total Annihilation 2.

We'll come out with four different expansion packs over the next year, plus what we release from our web site. The expansion packs will not include just more tanks and more spacecraft. One of our expansion packs will include insectoid units, which are like the Spider Robots-mechanical, but spiders, and they will reproduce; spiders that build themselves. So that new pack will be a completely different experience. We'll also have a pack that we call psionics-mind control, where you now have a whole new set of weapons. When they are employed you get to control any unit in their vicinity, a whole different game play. We want our expansion packs to be very different, not just more of the same. We'll use Cavedog's web site for more of the same-better radar, better tanks, etc.

With the add-on packs, I really want to be able to respond to what people like and don't like about the game. So, after the first one that will come out in January or February, I want to get a feel for the landscape before we start going into those. People may pick up on certain units or certain types of game play, and I want to be able to give them what they want with those packs.

Bateman: I understand you've got some wacky units coming?

Gilbert: We're definitely going to do that, although we don't have any concrete ideas. Chris and I have talked about doing some really bizarre things-like, clown robots-a hundred of them get out of a Volkswagen and they all run around. Just doing some really fun stuff like that. People like to take their games seriously, but they also like it when you poke a little fun. The way we'll have all the add-on units structured, if you don't like the clown K-bots, just turn them off. Don't play with them.

Bateman: Where do you see the future of gaming? Is technology or creativity leading right now?

Gilbert: The only thing that I'm not pleased about is that I wish there were more people playing games. I really would like it-and not just for financial reasons. As a designer, I like to have as many people as possible play what I do. You can sell three or four hundred thousand copies of something, which is a big hit today, but I'd like a lot more people to be playing what I do than just that many. In terms of technology versus creativity, it's a balance. Occasionally you get a game that comes out that's a technology marvel and no game play, and it sells a lot. Sometimes you get other games that come out that have a lot of game play and no technology. If you look at Command & Conquer, that sold over a million copies. There's nothing technically fascinating about that game. We could have built that game in the Commodore 64 back in 1989. I wish I'd thought of it. That's an example where the game play in that product was really what made it go, not the technology.

Bateman: Chris, what gives you the biggest hope about computer gaming in the near future?

Taylor: The Internet. It's improving and we're getting better bandwidth and lower latency. And we're getting more RAM with our computers. When you get a multiplayer war game going in a gigantic world, it's just a whole different experience. In the future, we'll be able to play massive wars with people all over the world. [Laughs] It doesn't get any better than that! ■

Myth Sports A 3D Engi
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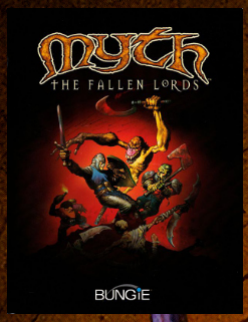
THE FALLEN LORDS



MYTH
THE FALLEN LORDS

EDITOR'S RELOADED CHOICE

Developed by BUNGIE and published by EIDOS

projectmagma.net/downloads/tfldx

Replay by **CIOLAN**

When I think of Myth, two things pop in my head instantly. One is that monotonous voice announcing on a casual(ty) tone a sudden decrease in population. And the second one is the root cause of the aforementioned decrease: The. God. Damned. Dwarves. In The Fallen Lords (but less in its sequel), the dwarves are both a curse and a blessing. Either you learn quickly to utilize them, or you will watch your squad being reduced to a pile of bloody debris by your friendly neighbourhood dwarves. But I am getting ahead of myself, let's start at the beginning. ▼

Telling (Dwarf)
"The early Dwarven eddas always speak of heroes 'having gone north into the mountains to slay Ghôls', but most repeated is the tale of Dvalin son of Alfrigg, third ephor of Stoneheim ..."
4

In the beginning there was Dune 2. Between us, I am well aware that Dune 2 is considered the first RTS only because Herzog Zwei was either unlucky or truly ahead of its time, but Dune 2 established the classic RTS formula which was copied by everyone and its mother until the world stopped caring for RTS games. So, in the beginning there was Dune 2. We had resources to collect and bases to transform them into puny footsoldiers and mighty war machines. Unfortunately, so did the enemy (be it the AI or another human). The gameplay loop was pretty simple. Build a base, harvest resource, build defenses, amass a big army and throw big rocks/rockets/lasers at the enemy's base. Classic. Everyone wanted a piece of the delicious RTS pie so the formula was kept intact for a long time. However, a few games wanted to be more than that. Among those, Myth The Fallen Lords.

Fore those addicted to acronyms, Myth: The Fallen Lords was, is and it will be until the end of the Universe (thank you, Project Magma) a RTT. Real Time Tactics. No building, no counting spice/gold/wood/spacecredits, no exploitation of the working class, just good old fighting. In a time when the classic RTS was kinda ruling the strategy market, Myth tried something different. It did away with resource collecting, base building and all those elements that kept you away from the good fight and used only what was needed to wage war on a relentless enemy: soldiers. Each mission begins with a fixed number of units, with more joining on the way when the mission scripting demands it. Not only did you have to keep those units alive, because reinforcements are a pretty strange concept for Myth, but also you had to face insurmountable odds against an enemy who sent wave after wave of undead against you. Victory can be achieved, even on the legendary difficulty level (I managed it once, but only the first mission), by carefully maneuvering the units you've been gifted, especially the dwarves I was talking about at the beginning of this text. The little fellows are true weapons of mass destruction. As for whose destruction, that is debatable. Most of the time is the enemy's if you learned to micromanage the bearded walking barrels of dynamite. The rest of the time, they are more dangerous to you than the enemy. Every mission where you are given one or more dwarves is a beautiful micromanagement hell where you ▶

"In a time long past, the armies of the Dark came again into the lands of men. Their leaders became known as The Fallen Lords, and their terrible sorcery was without equal in the West.
In thirty years they reduced the civilised nations to carrion and ash, until the free city of Illadrigal alone defied them. An army gathered there, and a desperate battle was joined against the Fallen.
Heroes were born in the fire and bloodshed of the wars which followed, and their names and deeds will never be forgotten."

"We retreated from the river into chaos. There was no time to write until the following day, when we finally left the swamp for drier ground in the north. We held Soulblighter at the Gjol long enough to let Alric spring his trap on the Watcher. Turned out I was right about those arrows: Alric had been working on them since we entered the marsh two weeks ago, and they were tipped with fragments of bone from the Watcher's arm.

I sure wouldn't have wanted to get stuck with one, but apparently they turned the Watcher into stone, leaving him paralyzed and helpless. But he didn't die. Thirty berserks chosen to accompany the archers tore through the enemy and piled the bodies of the dead at the Watcher's feet, but all were killed before they could deliver the final blow.

Rather than leave such a dangerous enemy behind us to be rescued, a hundred men have volunteered to return and smash him to fragments before help can arrive."

position your troops to cover the shorties while you are zigzagging the bearded timebombs like a madman and throwing more Molotovs at the armies of the dead than a full battalion of anarchists on a G20 summit. You guessed right. I love and I hate dwarves. They are walking memes that can set fire to your house while defending it from the taxman.

I know, I talked only about dwarves, but only because they are a crucial piece of your army. Then come the archers. Then the giants. Then the berserkers and the swordsmen. You get one type of healer unit. Very important if you want to keep those dwarves and archers alive. Some haters would say that if your units managed to get hurt, then you are not playing it right, but we are not all demigods. There is not a huge variety of units at any given time on the battlefield, but that is the beauty of it. You have to make the most of what you have been given. Sometimes you get some really really REALLY powerful units, like the Avatara, which wreak havoc on the battlefield with their dream of dispersion spell, but these moments are pretty rare, and you can imagine what the enemy has at his call when you are given the most powerful unit in the game. The very nice thing is that the units gain experience based on their kills and perform better (archers and dwarves have increased accuracy, footsoldiers get more life and armor, etc), and some of them, sometimes all of them, are transferred to the next mission. Along with the possibility to rename your units, this creates a sense of camaraderie between the creatures on both sides of the computer screen.

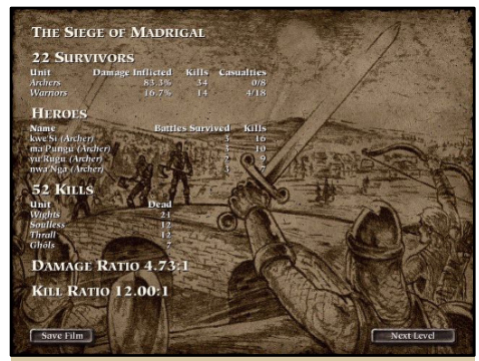
CronnySockett (Berserk)
A berserk at the Stair of Grief, having been told that the hosts of the Soulless were so many that their spears would hide the sun, is said to have replied 'Then we shall fight them in the shade.'

The story is narrated by a lowly soldier with a very, very, very nice voice, and follows a series of guerrilla missions intended to turn the tide against the armies of darkness. Its main source of inspiration is The Black Company series by Glenn Cook. Won't spoil it for you, the main premise is that the Fallen Lords, a bunch of evil and magical bastards led by The Leveller, are bent on destroying the world. The humanity and its allies try their best to postpone the Apocalypse. In the world of Myth, the wheel turns as the wheel wants, and today's heroes will be tomorrow's villains. There is a twisted balance in this that makes my skin crawl a bit. For example, in Myth III: The Wolf Age - not developed by Bungie, a commercial flop, and generally

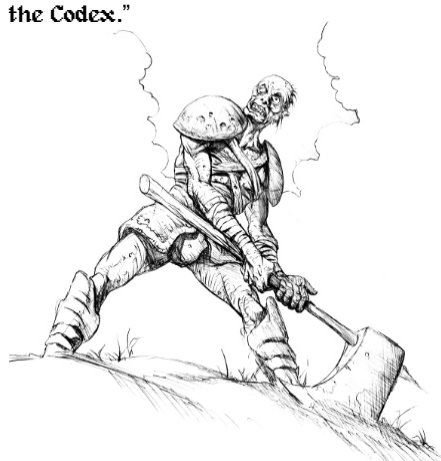
considered by the Myth community to be the weakest in the series (though I personally like it a lot) - you discover how Soulblighter, Balor, and the rest of the Fallen Lords came to be. You guessed, they were all heroes in Myth 3. The atmosphere is bleak, almost hopeless; each mission is a desperate struggle to survive. There is no music during the mission, which adds to the lovingly depressing atmosphere. I can talk for days about how Myth looks and feels (even now, thanks to Project Magma and other fan projects which are keeping Myth 1 and 2 up to date and very good looking even by today's standards), but the space is limited and you always can see for yourselves (don't forget Project Magma).

At the time, Myth: The Fallen Lords was a technological wonder. It has 3D terrain, which looked magnificent if you managed to trick your parents into buying a 3DFx accelerator "for school". Not to mention the nicely animated sprites and projectiles (Molotov cocktails, arrows, flying scythes, enemy heads and limbs) which obeyed the laws of physics. Blood stains the earth, little bits of enemies are flying in the air, and, if you were lucky, they hit some other enemy and reduce its health bar by a bit. The terrain and game physics have an effect on the gameplay, as I was stating before. Archers on a hill have increased accuracy and range, the arrows can hit the trees if the enemy (or you) was smart enough to hide behind them, the bits and pieces of the enemies hit by a dwarfbomb can hurt other enemies, there are some units who pick debris up and use it as a throwing weapon and so on. I don't use this expression lightly (i think i used only four or five times before, and one of them was when I talked about terrain physics in Magic Carpet games), but I consider Myth to be one of these games who were clearly ahead of their times. Maybe this is one of the reasons Myth still has an active community (both for modding and for playing) and yearly championships are still organized. Yeah, it also had multiplayer, both coop and versus, but I have never played it. From what I have read, it was a blast.

Myth 1, 2 and, to some extent, the third one (heavily patched though) are among my all time favourite games. If I were to have a best of the best list (unfortunately I don't like lists too much), those absolute gems would rank very high up, let's say the third place. The first is and it always will be Monkey Island, followed closely by Enemy Unknown (the Gollop one). I'll say it again, they were masterpieces truly ahead of their times and one of the most saddening first world tragedies is Bungie not continuing the series and instead choosing to sink all their talent in tens of HALO games. Played a couple, they are pretty nice, but man, I would kill for a new Myth made by the same people. ■



"The battle for Madrigal lasted four days without pause. Shiver fell on the first night in a spectacular dream duel with Rabican, one of the Nine. No one expected this. We have never before challenged one of The Fallen and won.
But the truth behind the victory is stranger than any of the rumors. Apparently, The Nine found the severed head of one of Balor's enemies from the old days, buried out in the desert under several tons of sand and rock, and managed to start talking to the thing. Balor is the power behind The Fallen Lords, and we figure his enemy is our friend.
They say that The Head had an old score to settle with Shiver, and told Rabican that her one weakness was vanity, and showed him how to exploit it. The Head appears to know something about everything, and now it has us looking for an artifact called the Total Codex. It's been located in the ruined city of Covenant, but the first group sent to retrieve it has not returned.
In a few minutes, Rabican himself is going to send a few of us through a World Knot to Covenant, to bring back the Codex."



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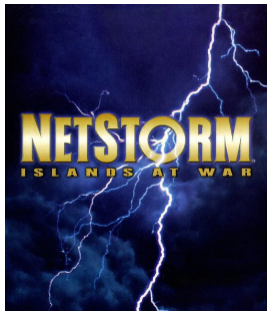
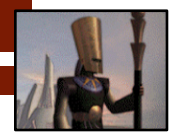


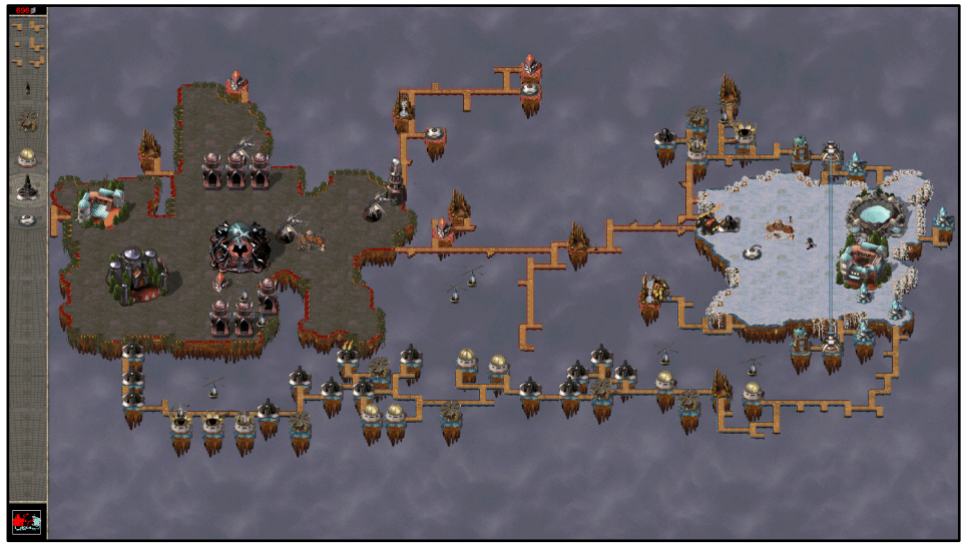
NETSTORM
ISLANDS AT WAR

Developed by TITANIC and published by ACTIVISION netstormhq.net

Replay by **ANDREI "ZULUF" NEAGU**



Mile High Club Warmongering



Welcome to the world of Nimbus. An endless expanse of clouds, broken up every now and again by floating landmasses, each under the dominion of their very own high priest. Bridges extend from one island to the next, but not in friendship, rather in a very elaborate scheme to outgun and outposition the enemy. All along them, platforms hold all manner of cannons, helipads and catapults, each with their very own range and firing pattern.

You see, these priests worship one or more of the three Furies of Nimbus: Thunder, Rain and Wind, and in return, they grant you their arsenal. Your aim will be to build bridges (using randomized Tetris-like pieces that come in infinite supply) in order to find the best path where you can lay down your towers. Ultimately, you'll have to immobilize and capture the enemy high priest and sacrifice them to win the game.

In order to afford the infrastructure you'll need to get there, however, you'll need Storm Power, a crystal-like substance that powers your towers, fuels your research and pays for the mooks that gather it. Selling towers, denying your enemy access to their own geysers or ambushing their resource carriers on the way are all valid strategies, and deciding on the best course of action is almost never a straight path, much like the bridges you build rarely go in a single, straight direction.

Looking back, I always felt Netstorm to be a one-of-a-kind beast. While somewhat accurate, describing it as a mixture of Chess, Tower Defense and Tetris doesn't quite do it justice. Each of these systems contribute to a flavorful gameplay loop in which creativity and quick thinking are rewarded, and small mistakes and gaps in your defense can just as easily be exploited to turn the tide of war.

Elemental Bizzarrchitecture

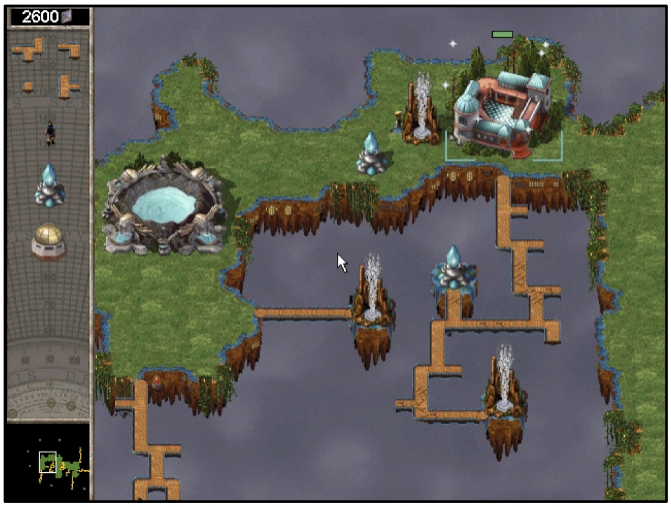
Each of the Furies brings its own arsenal, a mixture of towers and transport units. While Wind mostly offers low-cost, fast solutions, Thunder sits at the opposite end of the spectrum, with expensive, perhaps more rigid responses, and lastly Rain bridges the gap between the other two by providing middle-of-the-road towers in terms of damage and cost and moderately flexible range patterns.

There's a fourth element, which is the Sun, a non-specialized school that is readily available without any research but generally offers a considerably weaker kit than any of the Furies. Still, mixing and matching two or more of the elements will pretty much be the bread and butter of the increasingly more difficult missions in the campaign, and as you unlock more units with each sacrifice you'll find that the developing arsenal is not only useful, but necessary to finish the later maps.

Of course, you don't have access to all of the Furies at any given time, and choosing which branches to develop in your tech tree will be limited to however many research points you get for a specific mission. Deciding on the best synergy and taking a unit over another is a major part of developing your conquest, second only in importance to your ability to build bridges on the fly.

Practice will show you that there's a soft rock-paper-scissors relationship between the elements, as generally speaking Wind has an edge over Thunder and the latter mostly beats Rain, but in most scenarios these advantages will be nullified by superior positioning and forward-thinking.

All this talk about functionality might give off the wrong impression that Netstorm is a loreless boardgame-type deal, which is definitely not the case. What the game lacks in named characters or



traditional plot, it more than makes up for in encyclopedic descriptions, small worldbuilding details and general atmosphere. Almost everything has a lore entry, and the flavor text often reminded me of the type of minimalistic storytelling you can find on most Magic: The Gathering cards.

There's this crazy mixture of obsidian towers, flying jellyfish, airships and golems that paint a unique world, where magic and technology are indistinguishable from one another, and the native Nimbians live in submerged houses, so that the war raging above their heads doesn't disrupt their whimsical routine.

There's this ambiguous war partake in, but very little is specified about the belligerents or their causes. The missions mostly involve one-on-one fights between islands, and presumably there's a propulsion system that moves your island between missions, but much like the lore presented in the in-game encyclopedia, your imagination will do the heavy lifting when it comes to the undoubtedly many questions you'll have about the whos and the whats and the hows.

Amplifying this effect, I feel, is Mark Morgan's work on the soundtrack. Whether you've played Fallout, Shattered Steel or later, New Vegas, I have no doubt you'll recognize the melancholic theme, Serenity, as you try to make sense of the strange yet lofty universe. The dreamy synth chords that make up most of the soundscape create an interesting contrast against the cracks and thunderclaps that form the non-musical ambience. There's an air of mystery and a very memorable atmosphere, but it is achieved with very little actual material.

The sound cues, whether it's a tower charging up to fire, a building shattering or projectiles bouncing against impenetrable walls are all very suggestive and fitting, describing impact, momentum and destruction with punchy effects and mixing that even today makes everything blend in seamlessly.

A bridge too early

It's no secret that Netstorm's release was a flop. So much so, in fact, that the developer, Titanic Entertainment, promptly closed shop after shipping the title. A combination of poor marketing, primitive lobby infrastructure as well as the most usual of suspects (timing) pretty much doomed Netstorm as soon as it hit the shelves back in 1997. Fortunately, however, community efforts cemented its status as a cult classic. Presently, there's a high-res build you can download for free and an ongoing community, although it will take quite the effort on your part to be competitive in a scene that has been honing its skills for over two decades.

In the end, the fact that this community exists in the first place stands as a testament of Netstorm's potential as a competitive real time strategy game, but that's not to say that it's without fault. The random nature of the bridge pieces you get, unbalanced maps and a general lack of quality of life improvements will remind you often that this is a 90s game, albeit one of the more creative approaches to a genre that would very rarely attempt out-of-the-box thinking after Starcraft's release half a year later.

Still, it's hard to deny the appeal: whether it's the unique aesthetic, the opportunities to outwit your enemy and win spectacularly or the rich encyclopedia, there are many things worth playing Netstorm for. And while there are attempts to modernize it (including a 3D recreation in Unreal that didn't reach its Kickstarter goal) I wholeheartedly feel that the isometric perspective and 2D graphics are an integral part of what makes it striking and much prefer the original iteration.

Some of its themes and concepts would later make their way in other games (such as Sacrifice, Stratus: Battle For The Sky or Airborne Kingdom) to various degrees of success, but none of them quite reached the cult appreciation that Netstorm enjoys. And while some aspects of it will come across as unrefined to the modern gamer, there's an argument to be made that the title was ahead of its time in many respects. ■

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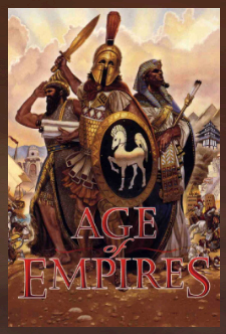

AGE OF EMPIRES

EDITOR'S RELOADED CHOICE

Developed by ENSAMBLE and published by MICROSOFT

ageofempires.com

Replay by **PETRU BALEANU**

"The vision of the game has always been one that straddles the line between action and strategy and there are two ways to do this. The first is to compromise on both, thus, taking away a little of each to find the middle ground. The second is to acknowledge that both are good and to find a way to marry both in one game. This is what we have tried to do in Age. There is more action, more strategy, there are more units, bigger maps, more cooperation, more technology etc. than in previous games of this genre. Instead of losing the action audience, what we have tried to do is to create a next generation RTS game."

- Rick Goodman on Age of Empires Game Design

Age of Empires is a historical real-time strategy game and the first game developed by Ensemble Studios. Initially titled "Dawn of Man", the concept behind it was to blend the historical setting and the age progression system from Civilization into an RTS, thus making it stand out from its science fiction and fantasy-oriented rivals like C&C and Warcraft. Development took two and a half years and was done by a team of 25 people, with Bruce Shelley, Rick Goodman and Tony Goodman in charge of design, Angelo Laudon and Matt Pritchard in charge of coding and Stephen Rippy in charge of music. Later on, Sandy Petersen from id Software, level designer for "Doom" and "Quake", also joined Ensemble Studios and worked on the Rise of Rome expansion pack, released in 1998, as well as subsequent games in the series. Age of Empires was released in October '97 in the US and was a huge hit, with sales in the country going above 178,000 units and revenues in excess of $8 million by the end of the year. Globally, the game sold through 850,000 units by February 1998. Today, it is widely considered one of the best and most influential games of all time and a landmark in RTS game design. Its success marked the starting point of the "Age of Empires" series of RTS games, one of the few RTS series that is still going strong today!

Age of Empires focuses on the period of ancient human history starting from the Stone Age and ending with Classical antiquity. The player takes control of a tribe of hunter-gatherers and has to command them through the ages while managing the economy, technological development and military forces in order to establish a powerful Iron Age Empire and prevail against the other players. The hallmark mechanic of the game is advancing through the game's four ages: the *Stone Age* (Paleolithic/Mesolithic), the *Tool Age* (Neolithic/Chalcolithic), the *Bronze Age* and the *Iron Age*. The player gets to choose between 12 civilizations: the Assyrians, Babylonians, Choson (Koreans), Egyptians, Greeks, Hittites, Minoans, Persians, Phoenicians, Shang (Chinese), Sumerians, and Yamato (Japanese). The civilizations are sorted into four distinct architectural styles, based on East Asian, Mesopotamian, Egyptian and Greek architecture, which determine their in-game appearance. The expansion pack, Rise of Rome, added 4 new civilizations: Rome, Carthage, Palmyra, and Macedonia, as well as a new Roman architectural style. ▶

Age of Empires is playable in both single-player and multiplayer modes. Single-player mode offers several history inspired story-based campaigns alongside a random map mode. The original Age of Empires release allowed the player to follow along the footsteps of the Ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, Ancient Greek and the Yamato people (Japanese), with the Rise of Rome expansion offering up four additional Roman-themed campaigns. The random map mode is a skirmish mode versus AI, where a map is randomly generated according to user specifications. Victory is usually achieved by military conquest against the other players. However, other victory conditions also exist, such as building a Wonder and holding it for 2000 years, acquiring and holding all Ruins on the map for 2000 years and obtaining and holding all Artifacts on the map for 2000 years. There is also the possibility of a Time Victory (highest score when the time limit expires) and Score Victory (first player to reach the designated score wins). All victory conditions imply, however, military conflict, as it is the basis of the gameplay.

Multiplayer worked both via local network and online, on Microsoft Gaming Zone, until support ended in 2006. The multiplayer mode was a hit, and its sequel, Age of Empires 2, further developed and expanded it, becoming one of the most played RTS games of all times, with a very large community still playing it today!

Units in Age of Empires are split into civilian units and military units. Civilian units are comprised of villagers that can collect resources and build buildings, priests that can convert enemy units, fishing ships, trade boats and trade carts. Military units can be further categorized into infantry units (clubmen, swordsmen, hoplites, etc.), mounted units (chariots, war elephants, camels, cavalry, etc.), archers (including mounted archers), siege units and naval units. The role of Naval units can vary depending on the amount of water present on the map, but their importance is often secondary to land units. They do, however, have the ability to boost the economy with the use of fishing ships and trade boats, so if water is present, it is often indicated to invest in navy units.

The Military aspect of Age of Empires relies on a rock-paper-scissors type counter system. This means that certain units excel against other types of units, and the player needs to constantly modify the composition of his army in order to adapt and outmatch his enemie's army. In Age of Empires I, compared to its predecessors, this system is not emphasized, but it still exists. As such, there are two rock-paper-scissors cycles:

- Infantry is superior to Cavalry, Cavalry is superior to Archers and Archers are superior to Infantry.
- Defensive buildings defeat regular units, regular units defeat Siege weapons, and Siege weapons defeat Defensive buildings.

The Economy is centered on obtaining four main resources - *food, wood, stone and gold* - plus a fifth resource – *population*. Each of the four main resources is obtained by sending villagers to gather them, while population is mainly obtained by building houses. When the player has gathered enough resources and built the required Age-specific buildings, he is able to start the process of advancing to the next Age. In the meantime, he needs to develop his military for both offense and defense from other players. One interesting aspect

of the economic system is the natural shift from gathering food and gold directly from the map in the beginning of the game, to obtaining them in a more structured and efficient way later on, via farming and trading, which simulates the historical change from hunter-gatherers to more advanced agricultural societies.

Each civilization in the game has its own personalized technology tree, inspired by history, and can prohibit certain units and technologies. Each one of them also has their own bonuses, which affect their military, economy, and overall playstyle. As such, a civilization can excel in certain areas (for example, economy, cavalry, navy, archers etc.) but can be mediocre or bad in other areas, allowing the player to select them according to his preference and playstyle.

Graphics are 2D isometric, like other RTS games, with beautiful representations of each architectural style. Age of Empires was mostly written in x86 32-bit assembly code, which enabled sprites to be loaded faster than in other RTS games from that era. The music composed by Stephen Rippy uses sounds from actual instruments from the historical periods the game depicts.

Age of Empires was the first of the Age of Empires game to receive a remake in 2018, called Age of Empires: Definitive Edition, which bundles together all officially released campaigns, adds gameplay improvements and remakes the entire game in modern graphics, in the same tone and vibe as the original ones. It also modernizes the multiplayer aspect of the game, breathing new life to the online community. Age of Empires: Definitive Edition was initially released on Windows Store, with a Steam release following later on. The other games in the series soon received the same treatment, with Age of Empires II: Definitive Edition becoming one of the most played RTS games on Steam and receiving constant updates and DLCs until the present day.

It is impossible to properly assess the impact the Age of Empires games had along the years, not only in pushing forward the boundaries of the RTS genre, but also in promoting the interest in history and human civilization among gamers. In my personal experience, the contact I had with Age of Empires in the 6th grade sparked my interest in history, both ancient and medieval, which motivated me to learn more about it and became a passion that has lasted until the present day! And I am sure that I am not the only one! Also, the rebirth the series had with the modern remakes it received since 2018 is also unique in the gaming world, being one of the few, if not the only 28 year old game series still being played and receiving official updates and DLCs. As such, Age of Empires can be considered not only a game *about* history, but a game that *made* history in its own right and inspired an entire generation of gamers – a real masterpiece of the 90s! ■

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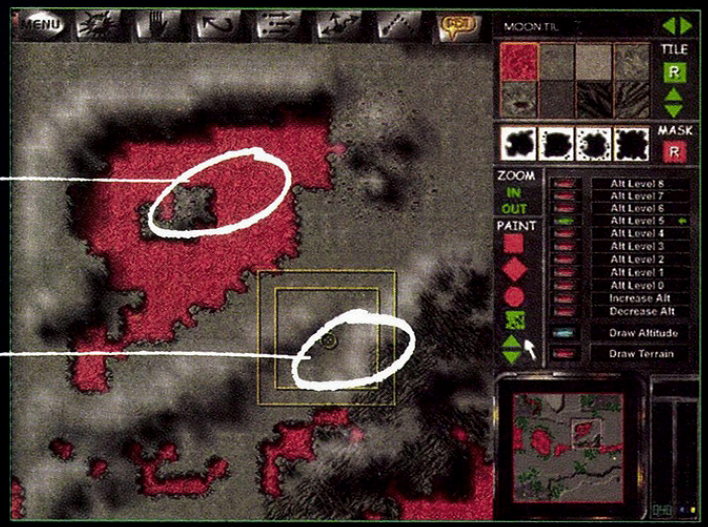

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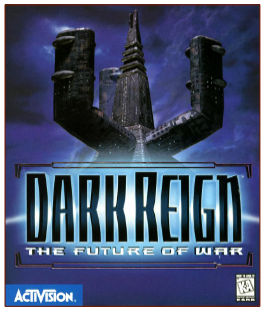

DARK REIGN

THE FUTURE OF WAR

Developed by AURAN and published by ACTIVISION

auran.com/games/

Replay by **DOMINUS**

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Developed by Auran Development, an Australian company based in Brisbane, founded by Greg Lane and Graham Edelsten, Dark Reign hit shelves in September 1997 after securing a deal with Activision and brought fresh ideas to the genre, distinguishing itself with unique mechanics, gameplay, and setting. Dark Reign quickly became Activision's fastest-selling game at the time, selling over half a million copies within two years, but it couldn't touch Command and Conquer's sales, which sold over three times the amount in its launch window.

Initially, Dark Reign was just a garage project by two guys in Australia who had never launched or made a game before, but after the foundational months of development, they realized they had something good on their hands that could be a real success. Lane and his partner Graham worked on the game out of his house for about 18 months, which got them a functional demo to show at an Activision press day held in Los Angeles in late 1996, which was well-received by the press, leading Activision to give the developers an extension to properly finish the title, paired with a marketing push.

The idea for the game, initially called Corporation and later renamed to Dark Reign, was to create a strategic game that highlighted player control, gave a good sense of situational awareness, and had units that acted reasonably, with the Tactics Engine modeled after a board game called Robots. The Tactics Engine was based on the concept of stacking three units, typically a motive unit, a gun-type platform, and an electronic warfare unit, which allowed for control of the entire game through configuration files. The creators of Dark Reign had concepts that no one else had, including individual unit AI control and pathing systems, which they believed had a massive untapped market in the mod community, particularly since modding existing games at the time was complicated and required third-party tools. The game engine used in Dark Reign allowed for a high degree of control and customization of units, making it easy to create new units and implement changes, which was a significant advantage. The game's reactivity and ability to make changes quickly was impressive, with updates often being implemented and delivered to Activision within a week, which was unusual for game development at the time. The map editor was also a key part of the game, and the team shipped it with a manual, Tactics Engine, and configuration guide, allowing players to build their own entire game, and the team wanted players to have a sense of ownership and pride in their creations.

Dark Reign is a purely action-focused real-time strategy game with no diplomacy, research, or civic aspects, where players harvest resources, build structures, and deploy troops to eliminate the enemy, making for a fast-paced experience with little downtime. The game features three resources: power, water, and credits which create a resource system that encourages strategic depth with fun strategies and gameplay styles that can be built around it, including the use of units like the water contamination unit for resource denial. Power is needed to run the mini-map and maintain buildings, while water is collected and shipped off-world for credits. While Dark Reign includes standard RTS units like tanks and infantry, it also introduces unique elements. These include the Infiltrator, which can steal technology,

terraformers that alter terrain, and the temporal gate for instant unit teleportation. The game offered advanced unit control and behavior management mechanics. Players could set units to follow predetermined paths, avoid enemy fire or perform complex actions like patrolling a route, and adjust their behavior based on parameters like pursuit range, damage tolerance, and independence. This system was a precursor to modern unit queuing systems.

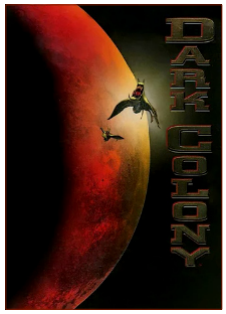
The playable factions, the Freedom Guard and the Imperium, are separate from the player faction, and the player must prove themselves worthy to go back in time to prevent the destruction of their race by defeating the two clashing factions on their planet. The factions in the game share some initial classes of units and structures but diverge early on with multiple different stats, strengths, and weaknesses, making for a unique gameplay experience. Additionally, the terrain's 3D movement and positioning play a crucial role, offering strategic advantages based on elevation and landscape features where hills and mountains affected how units behaved and engaged with each other, adding a new layer of complexity to the gameplay and making fog of war more complex – a game aspect that the competitor Total Annihilation also offered just 3 weeks later.

Despite its positive aspects, Dark Reign had some flaws – the game's lore was rich but the story was not amazing, a lack of faction diversity and it drew heavy comparisons to Command & Conquer. Still impressive today, the game's musical score was composed by Jeehun Hwang, known for his work on other notable game soundtracks like MechWarrior 2, Heavy Gear, Battlezone, and Interstate 76. The game was a commercial success, becoming the number four best-selling PC game in the United States in September 1997. This led to the development of a major expansion, **Rise of the Shadowhand**, released in 1998, which added new playable factions to address concerns about faction diversity – introduced two new factions, the Zenite and the Shadow Hand, which are spin-offs from the Freedom Guard and the Imperium. The expansion also offered new campaigns and multiplayer maps and the additional musical score is also very good. After the expansion was released, the original team behind Dark Reign eventually disbanded, with key members like Josh Resnick, Greg Borrud, and Andrew Cooper leaving to join other studios, such as Pandemic Studios, which went on to develop other notable games like Star Wars: Battlefront.

Today Dark Rain can be easily downloaded and played from GOG, and it is available for purchase with the base game and expansion. In 2017, a community patch emerged, fixing technical issues, restoring cut content, and adding an integrated multiplayer system. This patch is considered the definitive way to play this game today. The Dark Reign community is still active today, with fan-created patches, a launcher, and an integrated multiplayer suite, which is a testament to the game's enduring popularity. There is also a mod called the Evolution of Zenite mod, which is the biggest mod available for Dark Rain.

An unofficial add-on pack titled **Battles of the Outer Rim** was released in 1998. It was developed by Macmillan Digital Publishing USA and included six single player missions, 79 multiplayer maps and a searchable map browser. Auran, the company that created Dark Reign is still around today, but only with Greg Lane from the original team. They created the famous Trainz series, and as a fun fact, the original Dark Reign website from 1997 is still online at www.auran.com

Dark Reign may not have been among the defining RTS games of the mid-90s, but it was far from a failure. Given the team's experience, the result was a distinctive game with a unique aesthetic, solid gameplay, and several innovative mechanics that helped push the genre forward. ■



DARK COLONY

FLESH BURNS. METAL MELTS. BOTH SCREAM.

Developed by TAKE-TWO and published by SSI

Replay by **SEBASTIAN "LOCKE" BULARCA**

A depiction of cozy lost memories that came alive.

I will say from the beginning that this is not really a review as much as a trip down to a rather foggy memory lane, in a time where my gaming habits were only acceptable because that was my job - to play and write about it. It was, arguably, the best job in the world and I was paid for it.

I cannot say for sure when I got my hands on Dark Colony but I am pretty sure it was a suggestion from my colleagues much later than the year when the game was actually released (1997). I think I played the game sometime in the 2000s and I clearly remember getting caught pretty quickly due to a specific mechanic that the game is particularly known for - the day-night cycle which actually affects the gameplay.

Running the game today

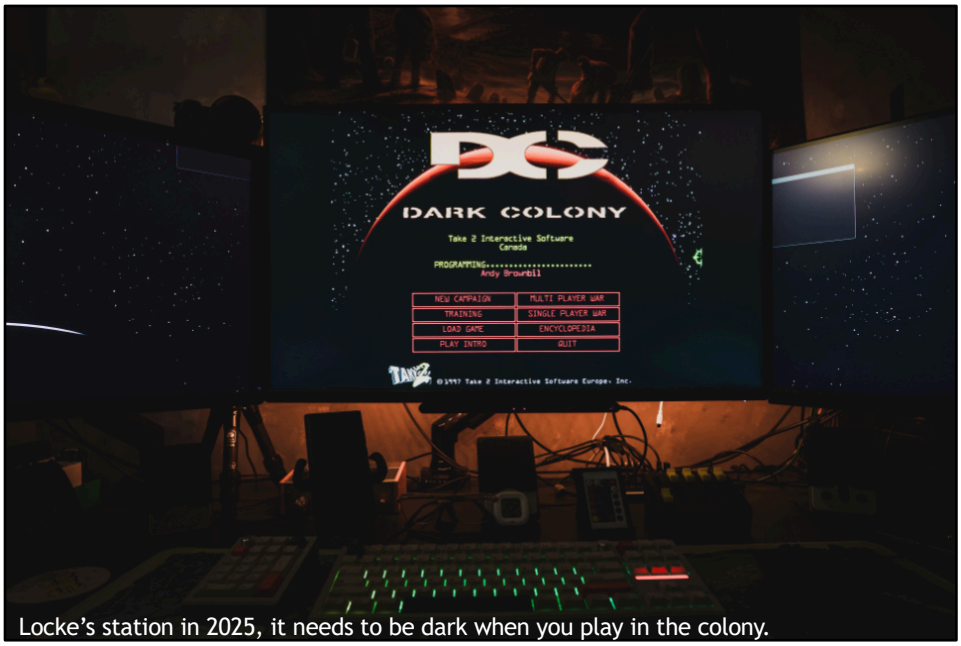
Getting it to work today was a bit of an adventure. The initial minimum game requirements listed are something like Windows 95, a Pentium 133Mhz, 16 MB of RAM, SVGA 1MB VRAM, 4X CDROM and 1Gb of disk space for a full install. Since there is no GOG version as yet (please search the topic on GOG.com and vote for it!), I had to use other types of tools and the results vary. The version of the game I found in one of the online game databases cannot be played in the current shape in a window, which would have been ideal, so I need to play it in 640x480px in fullscreen on my 32 inch 16:9 screen without any Lossless Scaling (check it on Steam) benefits. It ends up being a bit painful so I really hope someone will come with a more modern version in the future.

On the Grey side

The version I found has music. I found it to be particularly obnoxious especially since the game options do not allow turning it on/off or adjusting the volume. Such were the times. Why would you need to turn off the music when it is so cool to even HAVE a soundtrack to the game?! But, as for many of this "manipulated" version you can disable the music by quite literally removing the files from disk.

When it comes to playing, or more precisely, re-playing experience, I was quite surprised how quickly I got re-absorbed in the gameplay. The game, for the time, looked pretty decent and it had an atmosphere that reminded a bit of the old UFO series. All dark and gloomy and dangerous and strange and deadly.

Of course, 90s was the age of the little green man, so the main infantry unit for the aliens, the Greys, have a look that is as expected as it can be and they fly in Saucers. I remember back then reading all kinds of articles about how aliens should look,



Locke's station in 2025, it needs to be dark when you play in the colony.

given that invariably would be a superior species, or else how they would have had to travel the great nothingness of space. High intelligence with a high use of sensors like the eyes and the use of machines to replace physical labor would favor, evolutionarily speaking, massive heads with dragonfly sized eyes and slim bodies. That does not explain why and how they would carry weapons with the size of their entire body but one could always assume that unknown are the ways of the Greys.

In any case, the game has a charm which is very hard to avoid. From the crazylooking menu interface to the fairly pretty pixelated look and the unfiltered sounds of dying soldiers and aliens, after a few hours you're going to end up thinking "How did I miss this back then?!". Well, most of the poeple did. We were playing Command & Conquer, Warcraft II and Total Annihilation. There

was not much space for small titles with little or no marketing.

Reminder

I do not think a review is really necessary as much as a reminder of what this game is about, which is actually not that much. Dark Colony favoured simplicity and consistency.

At its core, Dark Colony is a two-faction RTS: the human Expeditionary Force and the alien Taar. The factions share a broadly similar unit roster — infantry, light and heavy vehicles, aerial units — but differ subtly in strengths. The humans favor durability and firepower, the Taar lean on speed and stealth, particularly at night.

That night is the game's most distinctive mechanic. The day/night cycle isn't cosmetic: the Taar gain bonuses under darkness, while humans excel in daylight. The shifts are gradual but tactically significant, forcing players to plan

offensives in sync with the Martian clock. It's one of the earliest mainstream RTS titles to integrate a dynamic time-of-day mechanic with tangible gameplay consequences, predating similar systems in later games like Battle Realms.

The economy is stripped down to a single resource: ore, mined from fixed deposits scattered across the map. Refineries process the ore, and power plants fuel your base. The simplicity makes each mining site a hotly contested location; holding them is the lifeblood of your war effort. There's no sprawling tech tree — units are unlocked quickly, and matches become about tactical use rather than slow buildup.

One subtle twist is the use of scanners to reveal enemy movements. Fog of war is aggressive here — without constant scouting, you're blind. The game rewards those willing to commit units to reconnaissance, even at the cost of losing them.

Council Wars was an expansion that was released later and added a few more things. Notably it had a new set of 16 single-player missions (8 for humans, 8 for Taar), new units and landmarks (crashed UFOs, Taar fortresses, Area 51) and a new neutral rattlesnake species that can be captured.

Forward

Putting the game in perspective today, I have played literally thousands of games since then. Still, maybe because "back in the days" we had less titles available, I did remember the experience of playing which I cannot say for many of the games I played in the last 10 years. Part of me almost wants to go back to a simpler time, but the greater part of me really loves the absolute overwhelming availability of great games that we have today and what I continue to look forward to all new games that might come. ■

SEVEN KINGDOMS

Developed by ENLIGHT and published by INTERACTIVE MAGIC 7kfans.com

Replay by **PETRU BALEANU**

Seven Kingdom was one of the more original and, at the same time, overlooked titles to come out in '97. Designed and developed by Trevor Chan from Enlight Software, it was an innovative RTS that blended classic RTS gameplay with 4X elements. It was overshadowed, however, by the release of "Age of Empires" one month prior and faced stiff competition in its genre from titles such as "Total Annihilation" and "Dark Reign" as well. Nonetheless, it managed to gather a fan base the years following its release, helped in no small part by a 1998 rerelease bundled together with a free patch that added new races and units under the title Seven Kingdoms: Ancient Adversaries. Sales picked up and, by the year 2000, it surpassed an honorable 200.000 units sold. As such, it also received a sequel in 1999 called Seven Kingdom II: The Frytan Wars, and another one, in 2008, called Seven Kingdoms: Conquest.

Seven Kingdoms allows the player to select one of seven races - Japanese, Chinese, Mayans, Persians, Vikings, Greeks, and Normans - and fight against other players for supremacy. Gameplay is a blend of RTS and 4X genres, with combat and unit control handled in a RTS manner, while also including 4X inspired Victory Conditions, Resource Management, Trade, Espionage and Diplomacy mechanics.

The Single Player mode offers the option to play a highly customizable sandbox mode (also akin to 4X games), and single scenarios with a wide range of objectives and difficulty levels. Multi-Player is also present and the game offers a very well put together set of Tutorials that touch on all the intricacies of the gameplay mechanics. The economy is based on two main resources, Food and Money. Both are initially obtained from the villages you control, while later on, money can also be made by mining raw resources like iron, copper and clay and turning them into goods that can be traded via the marketplace. This makes Trade a very important economic mechanic in mid to late game. A third very important resource is Population, since all specialist units (civilian and military) are trained from the population of connected villages.

Population replenishes over time, but having more villages under your control gives you access to more villagers you can turn into units. Meanwhile, Research is centered on military improvements, with the ability to unlock a wide range of war machines such as catapults, ballistas, cannons, spitfires, and porcupines.

Combat is handled in a classic RTS fashion, but with a few twists. Military units are under the control of a commander that has a fort and trains them from the population of a connected village. Most units have a veternacy mechanic, being able to advance in combat from green status to yellow

The game also features independent villages on the map, Fryhtan monster lairs and scrolls of power that can summon race-specific Greater Beings – super units that you can unleash upon your foes. To win the game, the player can go for the basic RTS victory condition of defeating all players on the map, or choose a more exotic objective, such as defeating all Fryhtan monster lairs on the map, or reach the requirements for an economic or population victory.

Graphic wise, the game sports the standard top-down 2D isometric look, similar to other games in the RTS genre. While not as good as Age of Empires, it does an ok job of setting the mood and transporting the player's imagination to the mythical land the game is set in.

Seven Kingdom is definitely a product of its time – an exercise in creativity and genre-defying mechanics, so characteristic of the golden age of gaming that were the 90s. Its unique blend of RTS and 4X elements adds freshness to the RTS formula, resulting in a varied gameplay that manages to keep the player entertained and on his toes at all times. Highly recommend to any fan of the RTS genre, or simply retro-gamers that never had a chance to try it out in the 90s! ■

and purple, with purple units gaining special attacks and better stats. Most units have a loyalty meter that is affected by a lot of in game variables, such as the state of your economy and your actions against other kingdoms. When the loyalty meter goes down, the chances of that unit defecting increase. On top of training units from your village population, you can also hire mercenaries from the Inns you build that provide access to a wide range of soldier from different nations, but are more costly.

Diplomacy is not very complex, but resembles games like "Civilization" a lot more than a RTS, with the ability to declare war, create alliances, settle for peace, ask for tribute, give resources, propose trade agreements and ask for technologies. A very important gameplay mechanic is espionage, which allows your spies to infiltrate, spy, assassinate and sabotage any kingdom you desire. Pretty complex and incredibly fun to use, it's one of the features that stand out and it is done even better than in 4X games. As an example of the power of espionage in Seven Kingdoms, here is a a possible scenario. If you infiltrate another kingdom's village with a spy, that spy has a chance to be trained as a soldier by a fort commander, and, if the commander is killed (by accident or not ;)) the spy has a chance to be promoted to the fort commander himself. At this point, you can choose to steal the fort for your own empire (which would make the kingdom involved your enemy), or wait, and, in the rare case that the enemy king somehow dies, your spy-commander has a chance to be chosen as the new king, which would make the entire kingdom now yours!

KKND
KRUSH KILL 'N DESTROY

Developed by Melbourne House and published by Beam Software

Replay by ION00 [natiuneajucatoare.neocities.org]

AVAILABLE ON GOG.COM

The year 1997 was Xtremely generous when it comes to real-time strategy games. Although the two biggest companies, Blizzard and Westwood, hadn't released any RTS games in that year, competition remained tight. The two great hits, Total Annihilation by Cavedog and Age of Empires by Ensemble Studios, were threatening to completely eclipse every other title. As such many of the rival production studios were Xperimenting with all sorts of new mechanics to distance themselves from the classic Warcraft and Command & Conquer games to rid themselves of the damning label of "clone". Games such as Netstorm, Dark Reign, or Earth 2140 were bringing many innovations which helped them to stand out in the crowd, and Uprising even made the jump to full 3D! Considering these facts, could a humble "C&C clone" even stand a chance? Let's find out!

Krush Kill 'n Destroy was developed by the Australian developer Beam Software, a division of Melbourne House. This was a company with previous Xperience in developing games both for the PC as well as consoles, with MS-DOS titles such as Gex, Bug!, and The Dame Was Loaded. They probably didn't want to try anything fancy with their first foray into the world of RTS games, as such KKnD doesn't deviate too much from the tried and true Command & Conquer formula.

I think the first thing that stands out is its post-apocalyptic universe. The plot goes like this: The nuclear war from 2079 had no winners. In the aftermath of this cataclysmic conflict, humanity splits in two: on the one hand those who retreat in vast underground bunkers, the so called Survivors, and on the other those who choose to remain on the planet's surface and adapt to the new Xtreme living konditions, the ones known as The Evolved. 60 years after the war, the two factions meet on the surface, and a new conflict arises, the stakes being soil and oil. It is interesting to note that, in theory at least, the mutants would be the good guys in this story since it is THEIR world that is being invaded by the "Symmetrics".

It sounds a little bit like another post-nuclear game from 1997, doesn't it? In any case, Fallout was released six months after KKnD, so I am not trying to insinuate anything, other than to remark the fact that post-apocalyptic universes were apparently in vogue that year. Although the story isn't anything to write (heh) home about, the way that it's told makes it stand out. Between each mission, we get a funny FMV clip where different characters played by real-life actors Xplain to us what is going on. I am of the strong opinion that FMV sequences NEED to make a comeback in video games, and I don't think I am the only one who feels this way. There's just something magical about cheesy 90's acting, don't you agree?

The gameplay itself is immediately familiar to anyone who has ever played a Westwood RTS. It borrows even the unfortunate choice of utilizing the left mouse button for both moving and attacking, which makes fights a bit more annoying than they should be. The interface is placed on the right-hand side of the screen, from where you can place buildings and train units. An advantage over C&C is that the UI is a bit more ergonomic, what with it taking less space and allowing for a better view of the action on the screen. As an Xtra feature when compared to the Westwood games, you can even queue up to nine units or even place them in an infinite production loop. Oil is the only resource that can be Xtracted from oil drills and sent back to power plants with the help of oil trucks. There is even a research mechanic! You will need a research or alchemy lab, then, to upgrade a building, you will first have to select the lab and then click the desired building. I mention this here because it took me a long time to figure out how it works. :)

Although the gameplay doesn't differ a whole lot between the two factions, there is still sufficient

rocket launchers, as well as giant scorpions and many more, all of them "upgraded" by the surface radiation, of course. Their voices are funnier as well. For Xample when you begin upgrading a building, you hear a voice saying "pondering", and when the upgrade is finished, you hear "building now smarter!". Very fun. The campaigns are long and hard, as was the standard back in those days. I, for one, have never been able to finish any of them due to the Xcessive difficulty in the final mission of each campaign. I still recommend playing through them, if for nothing else than watching those funny FMV videos. At any rate, the missions themselves are quite varied: escorting, resource gathering, commando-type missions, and of course lots of missions where you have to Xterminate the competition.

variety between them. In the early stages of the game, the infantry rules the battlefield. While fragile, it can cause massive damage. This is also helped by the fact that units earn Xperience during battles. There are two levels of Xperience, blue and red, and veteran infantry, unlike vehicles, can regenerate health! Its greatest weakness is that, in true C&C fashion, it is Xtremely susceptible to tank tracks or giant animal feet. Towards the end of the game, the balance of power shifts towards vehicles, although infantry never becomes truly useless, unlike many other games of this genre. There are no ships, but you do get bombers as a form of recharging super weapon, a la Red Alert, once you've advanced enough technologically.

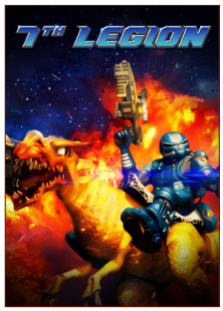
Overall, the two factions can be considered to be balanced, although I have to admit that The Evolved win a couple of points in my book due to their creative look. The devs had a lot of fun designing them. Survivor units are a bit more generic: riflemen, tanks, jeeps, etc. The Evolved army, on the other hand, consists of wolf riders, elephants with mounted cannons, giant crabs with

The game was rushed out to the market in early 1997 in a shoddy state. In the end, this probably helped it in the long run because the competition hadn't released its big hitters yet, namely Total Annihilation and Age of Empires. Later that year, to make amends, our Ozzie friends re-released the game for Windows 95 with an Xtreme at the end because in the 90s EVERYTHING had to be Xtreme. It came with new missions and a skirmish mode called Kaos Mode. They also hyped out a brand new AI, but in reality, it wasn't any different from the original game. The AI still cheats with regards to resources, and it starts with its buildings already placed, however, it has a feature which is almost completely absent in other RTS games, more specifically, the fact that after a failed attack, it will retreat its few remaining troops, thus giving the illusion of tactics. It doesn't add anything, but it's a nice, distinctive touch.

The game received a sequel in 1998 called KKnD 2: Krossfire, which added a brand new faction, the robots, as well as a few mechanical changes and additions, including actual flying units, but in my opinion, it also lost a lot of the charm that made the original so fun. Where's my FMV vids, dammit!!!

All in all, KKnD Xtreme is a typical product of PC gaming from the Xtreme 90's: RTS, isometric graphics, corny FMV videos, badass music, and last but not least, a lot of soul! Calling it a classic of the genre would be an Xagerration, but in my opinion, the game aged surprisingly well, and any fan of the genre ought to give it a try. Just don't Xpect anything groundbreaking or mindblowing. For me, this remains a nostalgic title that I enjoy firing up every once in a while. It helps me remember those good old misspent childhood days in front of a 15" monitor with a whole batch of demo CDs at hand, one of them containing a quirky little post-apocalyptic game bearing the strange name of KKnD Xtreme...

PS: *There is a fan project called OpenKrush whose aim is to reimplement both games in a brand new open engine similar to how OpenRA does it. It is currently on hold, however, the developer hopes that one day he will be able to resume work on it, so keep an eye out because KKnD isn't dead just yet!* ■



7th LEGION

Developed by EPIC GAMES and published by MICROPROSE

Replay by **DOSboi AIDAN**

AVAILABLE ON GOG.COM

They say that at the center of our galaxy lies a supermassive black hole. At least that's what today's scientists are trying to pass off as the Great Nothingness, the nucleus of all endings and the very root of the Things That Must Not Be Known. Because if they were to truly look into that eye of darkness, they'd see me cursing in frustration at all the saints, hair torn out, eyes full of tears, with 7th Legion running on my Windows 98 PC.

You see, out of all the games of my childhood, 7th Legion is the only one I once loved but now makes me want to smash my keyboard over my knee. I've come to deeply hate it, as it remains the only game that shattered my rose-tinted glasses with an iron fist. I simply can't play it anymore. And yet, how is it that I remembered it so fondly, before it ripped my nostalgic viscera inside out?

7th Legion is an RTS developed by Vision Software in partnership with Epic MegaGames and published by MicroProse in 1997 — coincidentally, the same year I got my very first computer. In Romania. Out in the countryside. Where games were worth their weight in gold, and the best source for new gaming experiences were the demo CDs that came with gaming magazines.

That's how I had to bend over backwards, jump through flaming hoops, and walk on my hands just to get a LEVEL CD boasting, among others, Chasm, Dark Earth, Galapagos, Hexen II, Turok, NFS 2, Shadow Warrior, Scud, MageSlayer, and the cursed strategy game that devoured my days.

The trick was that I didn't really know what I was playing back then, and it didn't even matter if I understood the mechanics. The important thing was to see something moving on the CRT monitor, to feel it in the mouse and keyboard, to hear it in the speakers. Though "hear" was debatable, since I didn't even have a sound card yet — but you get my point. And so, 7th Legion was a demo with soldiers riding dinosaurs, where you could build red or blue bases and bash the enemy on a 2D map. That was all I cared about, which is why I never looked any deeper into it.

Still, it stuck with me, carved into my brain. When GOG reintroduced the game to their digital store, I thought to myself: "Hey Aidan, awesome, you can play that game again with soldiers riding dinosaurs!" — without realizing what that actually meant. Sure, it worked fine in the end, even on my Win98 PC, no problem — almost too fine, in fact, since it's one of those titles that's CPU-dependent right from the main menu.

The idea behind the two campaigns in 7th Legion is a conflict between The Chosen, who fled into orbit, and the poor souls left behind on the planet after a global evacuation. Since the latter banded together into Legions, of course a war breaks out when the Chosen return and decide to reinstate the Government, with everything that entails — taxes, dinosaur levies, and a fuel excise tax for tank diesel.

You're tasked with leading one of the two armies to victory, using the mechanics of a real-time strategy that lets you build almost instantly, gather credits, and spend them on troops that are squishy as hell. Especially since 7th Legion spices things up with an interesting feature: cards that can be played at any time. Even from behind the fog of war. Which leads to those utterly infuriating moments when you're consolidating your base, recruiting dozens of little soldiers, and right when you send them off to battle — boom! — an electromagnetic storm

obliterates everything. From where? The other side of the map, of course. I exaggerate a little for effect… but only a little.

And this, really, is why I can't play 7th Legion anymore. Even though I remember it fondly, I feel it relies on an RTS formula that no longer matches my brain — nor my understanding, from 1997 until now, of what real-time strategy should be. It just doesn't work in 2025, from its clumsy interface to its repetitive, exhausting missions, disastrously unbalanced in terms of offense/defense tactics.

That's it. The only retro game in my collection I once remembered fondly, but have come to dislike. It probably wasn't good back then either — just as it isn't good now. I installed it, played it for a few hours, uninstalled it, and — I hope — I'll forget it in a few days. But hey, soldiers with laser guns riding dinosaurs are still super cool! ■

EARTH 2140

AVAILABLE ON GOG.COM

Developed by TOPWARE and published by UBI SOFT

Replay by **DOMINUS**

If you squinted hard enough in 1997, you could almost convince yourself that Earth 2140 was the next big thing in real-time strategy. Robots, nuked wastelands, cold war aesthetics, what's not to love? The box art promised apocalyptic carnage and Terminator-style chrome murdermachines. The reality? Well... more of a nuclear hangover than a new dawn.

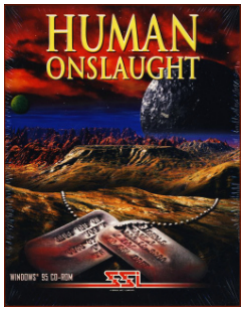
Set in the year 2140 (obviously), after humanity has done its usual thing and cooked the planet with enough nukes to make Chernobyl look like a barbecue, the world's been carved into two factions: the shiny, robot-loving United Civilized States and the grim-faced Eurasian Dynasty. The UCS are your lazy future Americans lounging in underground condos while AI warlords run their battles. The ED are your iron-fisted, oil-stained survivors pounding metal into tanks and praying the reactors hold out another day. Civilization at its finest. Gameplay hits every box on the RTS checklist. Build base. Mine ore. Deploy tanks. Crush the enemy. Repeat. If you've played Command & Conquer, you already know the dance moves. But Earth 2140 does throw in a few steps of its own. You can reprogram enemy units to fight for you, which is deliciously cheeky, and there's something charmingly brutal about how permanent the world feels. Build wrong? Tough luck, soldier. Blow up your own plant? Welcome to the consequences.

The graphics were pretty sharp for their time. Units swivel, turrets flex, buildings spark. There's a crisp, metallic beauty to the UCS mechs that looks fresh even today, and those pre-rendered cutscenes hit peak 90s sci-fi cheese. Earth 2140 nails that smoky, industrial future that other games of the era only flirted with. The isometric battlefields are packed with detail, and there's a certain grim charm to watching identical little murder-tanks rolling past ravaged terrain, power lines, and fortified bunkers.

The sound effects, on the other hand, could use an extra blast. Still, there's a weird sincerity buried under all the pixels and polygons—a kind of earnest effort from the Polish team at Reality Pump to make their mark in an era dominated by Westwood. Earth 2140 isn't the flashiest clone, but it's got that scrappy, European determination about it.

Play it today and you'll see a time capsule of mid-90s ambition. It's clunky, it's uneven, and it's beautiful in its own metallic way. As nostalgia fodder, it sits right between "lost gem" and "why did I love this again?" but load it up, listen to that throbbing industrial soundtrack, and suddenly you're back in your bedroom, dial-up modem screaming in the background, commanding a platoon of pixel tanks toward one last glorious explosion. In the cold light of hindsight, Earth 2140 is clearly a second-tier contender: respectable reviews at the time, a modest cult following, and a series that quietly lived in the shadow of bigger names like Command & Conquer and Total Annihilation. It borrowed a lot of its core ideas from the giants, wrapped them in a harsher, bleaker setting, and sprinkled a few clever mechanics on top without ever quite breaking free from the clone label.

Earth 2140 might be a relic from the dial-up age, but it's not stuck there. Thanks to a fan-driven revival in the form of OpenE2140, the old game has been hauled into the present with a modern engine that keeps the feel of the original while smoothing out the rust. The core experience is intact: tense base-building, grinding mechanized warfare, and that same post-apocalyptic mood, now easier to run on current hardware ■



WAR WIND 2
HUMAN ONSLAUGHT

Developed by DREAMFORGE and published by MINDSCAPE

Replay by **DOMINUS**

AVAILABLE ON GOG.COM

War Wind II: Human Onslaught, a game that, for better or worse, didn't quite roar loud enough to be remembered by the masses but still earned a loyal cult following. Developed by DreamForge Intertainment (who also made Sanitarium and Anvil of Dawn among others) and published by SSI in 1997, it came as a direct sequel to the original War Wind, continuing the story of the planet Yavaun but this time adding an Earth-born twist: humans crashing headlong into an alien war they were in no way ready for. The sequel picks up the interstellar slack from War Wind, hurtling a stone-chilled human contingent from Earth's icy Arctic straight into the chaos of Yavaun, courtesy of a magical artifact, of course.

The premise was surprisingly ambitious. While most RTS titles of the era were content with "red team versus blue team," Human Onslaught threw four wildly different factions at you. On one side, you had the alien Overlords, a nasty mash-up of Tha'Roon intelligence and Obblinox muscle. Opposing them was the mystical S.U.N., a fragile alliance of Shama'Li and Eaggra. Then came the newcomers: the Marines, humans who decided Yavaun might as well become their new empire, and the Descendants, another human faction far more interested in surviving long enough to find a way back home. That mix alone gave the game a different flavor. You weren't just building bases and sending in waves of units—you were picking a philosophy. Conquer, flee, dominate, or endure.

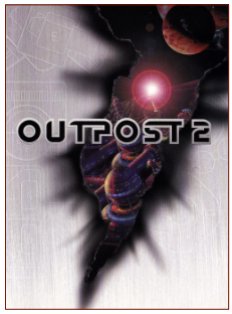
Gameplay was classic RTS at its foundation, but there were quirks that gave Human Onslaught its identity. Missions were designed to be more puzzle-like than simple "wipe everything off the map" affairs. Objectives might require careful preservation of units, tricky infiltration, or multi-step tasks that rewarded patience. Units themselves could be carried over from mission to mission if you kept them alive, giving the whole campaign an RPG-like layer of attachment. I remember nursing along a battered veteran squad through half the Marine campaign, feeling genuine pride when they finally upgraded into hardened death dealers. It wasn't something you got from many RTS games of that era, and it gave a real sense of continuity.

Unfortunately, all that ambition was wrapped in an interface that felt like it had been designed with oven mitts on. Controlling large groups of units was awkward, deselecting them was a chore, and the general clunkiness often made battles harder than they needed to be. Graphics were serviceable for 1997 - atmospheric, but already looking dated next to the shiny polish of Age of Empires. The cutscenes and voice acting had a certain pulp charm, but they couldn't fully hide that the game's engine was showing its age.

Reception at the time reflected this split. GameSpot praised it as one of the most entertaining strategy games you probably hadn't heard of, while European magazines gave it credit for tactical depth but criticized the sluggish controls. And of course, being released in the same breath as Age of Empires meant that a lot of players simply never noticed it. Timing is everything, and Human Onslaught had the bad luck of standing next to giants.

Looking back now, though, it feels less like a misfire and more like a forgotten gem. The factions were imaginative, the campaigns were surprisingly deep, and the attempt to weave story and persistence into an RTS campaign was ahead of its time. If you can get past the clunky interface there's a lot to enjoy here. It's the kind of game that rewards patience, the kind of RTS you play when you're in the mood for something offbeat and a little stubborn.

War Wind II: Human Onslaught will never be remembered alongside StarCraft or Age of Empires. But for those of us who dug into it, who spent long nights strugling with its controls while marveling at its ambition, it carved out a special place. It's a game that dared to be different, and while it didn't win the war, it still earned its veterans. ■



OUTPOST 2
DIVIDED DESTINY

Developed by DYNAMIX and published by SIERRA

outpost2.net

Replay by **DOMINUS**

AVAILABLE ON GOG.COM

Outpost 2 pitched itself as a cerebral twist on the wartorn RTS formula, swapping pixelated explosions for the quieter terror of planetary collapse. You played as one of two clashing human factions: Eden or Plymouth, scrambling to escape a dying world. Static cannons and rows of tanks were replaced by earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and morale meters teetering like a tipsy table.

The story, told through cliché-crisp mission briefings and a novella by J. Steven York, features two star-stranded lovers, Axen Moon (Eden) and Emma Burke (Plymouth), trying not to suffocate as their fragile world splits apart. The maleficent harbinger of doom, "The Blight," is a runaway terraforming bioagent that turns the planet into a chaotic science-fiction disaster cocktail: quakes, storms, lava, an asteroid belt that politely keeps hammering your city.

Forget standard RTS fare. There's no base-building Olympics or hyper-micro armies here. Instead, your colony's morale is the rock around which everything spins. Let it dip and efficiency crashes, resources vanish, and worker shortage becomes a lovely colony-wide plague.

OUTPOST 2
Mission Objectives (Alt+O)
Please see the Outpost 2 manual for instructions for this tutorial.
Press F1 for online manual instructions for this tutorial.
61,53
9000
GAME OPTIONS

You harvest two resources: common and rare ore. Common stuff is for basic buildings and vehicles; rare ore unlocks sophisticated tech. They're lopsided too: common ore near home, rare ore teased out at far edges. Trust me, your palms will sweat when a lava wave, blight, or meteor strikes right as morale collapses. No flashy abilities, just good old resource juggling, survival strategy, and panic management. It's like juggling chain saws in a wind storm... while calm classical music plays (or didn't).

Each side offers a slightly alternate campaign (12 missions each, 24 in total), with branching outcomes and narrative nuances, best experienced with the novella, or else you're squinting at text boxes asking "Why am I doing this again?"

Graphics and sound are solid for the era yet not a stellar triumph. Animations had charm, but the game sometimes felt like watching golems wobble across the screen.

The game had ambition and storytelling, but griped about sluggish pacing, lackluster combat, and no build queues, forcing rapid decision-making, at times cruelly so. The sequel fixed much of the original Outpost's infamy, complete story, functional mechanics, and richer design. A redeeming effort, though too late to rescue a franchise. Trivia nugget for your skull-craving mind: J. Steven York, who penned the novella, has engaged with the Outpost Universe fan community, so the story's caretaker still lurks in the shadows. Community support via Outpost Universe (OPU) brought unofficial updates (patches, bugfixes, modding support, native resolution, fan-made missions), keeping multiplayer and the game alive even in the modern age.

Outpost 2 is that stormy, atmospheric RTS you play when you want your colonists to weep quietly as the planet dies. The simple resource systems, frantic evacuation missions, and hidden novellas give it a uniquely melancholic tone, like watching your child grow up just to watch them walk off a cliff.

If you love RTS but are bored of bloodlust and explosion porn, this is a gem cloaked in existential dread. It's not graceful, it's not smooth, but it feels like the end of the world, twice, if you count your morale meter. Outpost 2 isn't about blowing up your opponent; it's about not letting the environment, and your own systems, kill you first. Community patches and fan devotion are the real starship engines here. ■

CONQUEST EARTH

FIRST ENCOUNTER

Developed by DATA DESIGN and published by EIDOS

Replay by **DOMINUS**

Conquest Earth promised a proper "Humans vs. Jovians" war with asymmetric interfaces, disguise mechanics, and TV-style picture-in-picture views. On paper? Spicy. On your hard drive? Well… we'll get there.

You can play either side. As Jovians, you're a rubbery, bio-tech invasion force who can disguise units as Earth vehicles or objects and even merge them Voltron-style into beefier forms; as Humans, you're the plucky defenders with more conventional gear and a UI that looks like it was bolted together in a cafeteria. Both factions don't just have different units, they've got totally different control schemes and menu systems, which is bold design… and, as we'll discuss, a user-experience booby trap. The battlefield lets you pop up a picture-in-picture display to monitor multiple hotspots - three views at once. You can drop waypoints, hand off control to AI commanders, and deal with literal fog as a mechanic: Earth's oxygen blinds the aliens; Jupiter's sulfur shrouds blind the humans.

The vibe is pure era: shimmering explosions, chunky isometric terrain, and a pulsing techno soundtrack by Eat Static, the psy-trance legends, shipped as Red Book audio you could spin in a CD player when your Pentium needed a rest.

So why did so many of us bounce off it like a mortar round on Jovian cartilage? Because the fiddly, sluggish control experience needed another pass (or three). Menu animations love to saunter on screen; inputs bog during big firefights; and those two distinct UIs mean relearning basic commands when you switch factions. It's the rare game where the "ooh, neat idea!" is immediately followed by "how do I make my soldiers… defend themselves?" and then by you thumbing the manual like it owes you money. Mission design doesn't help. Objectives are often "wipe 'em out," but the literal fog gimmick forces stop-and-start progress as you deploy special units to clear vision blockers a few pixels at a time. When the game hums, you glimpse the RTS it wanted to be; when it doesn't, you're micromanaging icons while your troops shoot air (or each other) because engagement logic forgot how range works. And yet… I can't pretend it's all coal. The intro movie is a late-90s FMV banger. The dual-faction personality is memorable (icky-organic Jovian HUD vs. brushed-metal Human HUD). Watching stray blasts scar the terrain was a neat flourish for the time.

That oscillation between imagination and irritation is the core memory. It's like the devs had a drawer full of good ideas and a calendar with too many X's through it. The asymmetry, the disguises, the atmospheric hazards, these could've been system-shaking innovations. What we got instead is an RTS that punishes your patience more than it rewards your planning.

Should you revisit it? As historical curiosity - absolutely. As a weekend RTS fix? Only if you're immune to UI shenanigans and have a soft spot for lost-cause experiments. There's enough aesthetic swagger and design ambition to study, especially if you love watching 90s teams wrestle with asymmetry and presentation tech, but the minute-to-minute is a museum piece: look, don't touch for too long. Bring curiosity, patience, and maybe a manual you can throw without breaking anything.

GameSpot crowned it Worst Game of 1997 in their year-end awards and early materials teased Saturn and PlayStation versions but they never shipped, likely casualties of the PC version's reception. Probably the best thing about the game is the soundtrack by Eat Static, pressed as Red Book tracks, cue it up in any CD player. That's the '90s, baby. ■

WARCRAFT II
THE DARK SAGA

Developed by BLIZZARD and published by EA

Replay by **DOMINUS**

PlayStation

Back in 1997, the PC was the undisputed king of strategy. The mouse and keyboard combo felt so right for commanding vast armies, and the genre was evolving at a breakneck pace. Command & Conquer blew us all away, but then came Blizzard's dark fantasy epic, WarCraft II: Tides of Darkness, which truly cemented the real-time strategy as the genre to beat. Looking back on its release, I can see why a lot of folks were skeptical. After all, porting a PC masterpiece like this to the PlayStation seemed like a crazy idea, and I was certainly curious to see how they'd pull it off. A gamepad for an RTS? This is either a brilliant revolution or a complete disaster. Good news: it's a huge success. Electronic Arts and Blizzard have pulled out all the stops for WarCraft II: The Dark Saga, and what a victory it is. First off, this isn't just a straight port of the original game. It's the full package, containing both the epic Tides of Darkness campaign and the even more challenging Beyond the Dark Portal expansion. You get the complete story of the Human Alliance and the Orcish Horde's brutal war over two continents, all on a single disc. It's a massive amount of content that will keep you busy for a long time.

The biggest challenge was translating the PC's point-and-click interface to a console controller, and the developers nailed it. The controls feel surprisingly intuitive and responsive. They've managed to map everything you need - from selecting individual units to building a massive Orcish stronghold - right to the D-pad and face buttons. I was thinking this would never work, but it just... does. All the key features are here: you can repair damaged buildings with a click, and you'll need to do it often as you demolish enemy towers with your catapults. The included mini-map in the corner is a lifesaver, providing a quick overview of the battlefield so you can see your troops advancing or that terrifying Orc horde

closing in on your human settlement.

At its heart, WarCraft II is a game of strategic depth. The gameplay loop is simple but endlessly engaging: you gather resources: gold, wood, and oil to build your base, train your troops, and research new technologies. The game is all about managing your economy while planning your next move. You have to think ahead, creating a palette of troops and exploring the different buildings and units for both sides. The Orcish side, in particular, has some wicked units, like the Deathbringer, whose spells bring nothing but doom and destruction. The PlayStation port, in particular, introduces some welcome quality-of-life changes that, dare I say, make it feel even more suited for a console experience. The most notable of these is the ability to queue up unit production, allowing you to set a building to continuously create a specific number of units, or even to

automatically upgrade a building as resources become available. This simple change allows you to focus on the action on the battlefield rather than constantly micromanaging your base, a significant advantage over the PC original. Additionally, the developers have increased the unit selection cap from the PC's nine to a more generous sixteen, making it easier to manage larger armies and execute powerful assaults without having to break your forces into smaller groups.

While the core strategic experience remains intact, the game's feel is different on the console. The slower, more methodical pace of the controller, in contrast to the rapid, precise clicks of a mouse and keyboard, forces a more tactical, big-picture approach. You're less able to quickly pull individual damaged units out of a fight or micro-manage spellcasters, which puts a greater emphasis on unit composition and pre-battle planning. The PlayStation version's AI also feels a bit more forgiving, and the streamlined controls make it a great entry point for those new to the RTS genre who might have been intimidated by the PC version. The console version doesn't skimp on the presentation, either. While the in-game graphics might be a bit of a downgrade from the PC's sharper visuals, they are a vibrant, colorful pixel-art feast that stays true to the original's style. The developers made up for it by adding new, exclusive full-motion video cutscenes that expand the lore. The background music and sound effects are absolutely top-notch, and the humor that pops up in the floating speech bubbles adds a charming, quirky layer to the fantasy carnage.

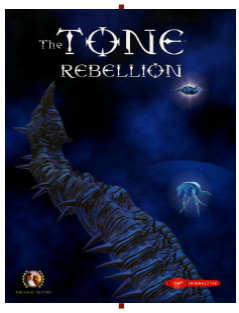
The Dark Saga got the strategic depth of the PC original, and enough content to keep you busy for ages. This isn't just a good port; it's a great game in its own right, and it proves that consoles can do RTS just as well as the PC. ■

REPLAY MENTIONS

There were a few other RTS games that were released in 1997 but they didn't make a big splash, or rather no splash at all, yet they need to be mentioned here because while maybe not amasing enough followers or sales they did try to be original in their own way either trough gameplay mechanics or theme, and that is quite important.

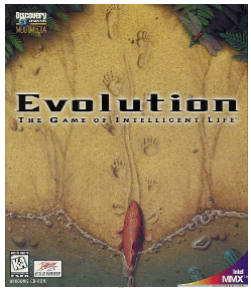
Fragile Allegiance

Set in the year 2496, players act as corporate administrators managing asteroid colonies in a cutthroat galaxy where diplomacy, trade, and sabotage are as crucial as military might. The game is notable for its deep strategic layers - players must balance mining operations, research, colonist morale, and interstellar politics. Its real-time pace combined with complex management systems created a challenging yet rewarding experience. Visually, it featured detailed pre-rendered graphics and a moody, atmospheric interface that suited the corporate sci-fi theme well.



The Tone Rebellion

A unique real-time strategy game that blends mysticism, abstract visuals, and strategic depth. Players control the Floaters, a peaceful alien race, in their battle against the evil Leviathan by harnessing four elemental "Tones": Order, Chaos, Unity, and Vitality. What sets the game apart is its spiritual and symbolic approach to gameplay. Each Tone influences your units and structures, creating a layered system of strengths, weaknesses, and synergy. The surreal art style and atmospheric soundtrack add to the game's dreamlike quality. While its unconventional design and steep learning curve kept it niche, The Tone Rebellion stands out as one of the most original RTS games of its time.



Evolution: The Game of Intelligent Life

This game is an educational real-time strategy game developed by Crossover Technologies and published by Discovery Channel Multimedia. The game lets players guide life from the Precambrian era all the way to the dawn of human civilization. Players evolve creatures by researching new species, adapting to environmental changes, and competing against rival life forms. Visually, the game was ambitious for its time, featuring digitized animations of prehistoric creatures and an evolving world map. The gameplay blends elements of strategy, biology, and historical simulation, although some found the pacing slow and the interface clunky by modern standards.

Beasts and Bumpkins

A quirky real-time strategy game that mixes medieval village-building with lighthearted humor. Players manage a small kingdom, growing their population from simple peasants ("bumpkins") into a thriving society while defending against monsters and rival factions. The game stands out for its cartoony graphics, tongue-in-cheek voiceovers, and comedic tone. Underneath the humor lies a surprisingly challenging management system, requiring players to balance resources, morale, and military readiness. Though not as deep or polished as other RTS titles of its era, Beasts and Bumpkins has charm in spades and remains a fondly remembered cult classic for fans of light strategy with personality.

The Sexiest CPU Ever Made

Klamath

What follows can't really be seen as a hardware review — it's more of a nostalgic trip back to 1997, a remembrance of an old friend who stood by me through all my gaming (and not only) adventures until 2002.

I don't remember if it was 1997 or 1998 when I finally got this precious piece of hardware for my PC. Oh yes, it was precious — especially for a young Romanian! I remember paying around $1,000 for it: a brand-new and shiny Intel Pentium II 266 MHz, codenamed Klamath (you can now check the signature of this article :-)).
Intel has stayed true to its habit of giving its processors codenames over the years. In the case of the first generation of Pentium II CPUs, the name didn't come from the Klamath city in Fallout, but from the Klamath River and Cascade area in Oregon and northern California.

My first computer was a 486, and I remember reading back then about the mighty Pentium Pro — a real beast at the time — and imagining what it would be like to play games on such a CPU.] It was a time when the processor was the decisive piece of hardware influencing performance — we didn't yet have 3D-accelerated video cards. Then it happened that, at the beginning of 1997, I sold my 486 because I had to focus on other priorities, and by the autumn of that year, I was already desperate without a computer. I remember going through every gaming and hardware magazine I could find, dreaming about my next build.

The Pentium MMX had just been launched, and preview articles for Unreal mentioned that the game would support a special MMX rendering mode, with colored lighting and other sexy marketing buzzwords. The first generation of Pentium II processors — Klamath — was released in May 1997 on a 350-nanometer process, ranging from 233 MHz to 300 MHz. It marked a major improvement over the Pentium Pro, adding MMX support, doubling the L1 cache, and reducing production costs — even though the L2 cache was slower than on the Pentium Pro. It also featured better 16-bit performance and promised fantastic results in upcoming 3D games such as Quake II and Unreal. I was immediately sold, and I somehow managed to convince my mother to do the craziest thing imaginable to get me my dream machine.

Let's put it into context: in 1997 Romania, the average monthly salary was around $100, and a one-room apartment in Bucharest cost about $6,000. Now, a Pentium II Klamath alone was $1,000. Who in their right mind could afford something like that in Romania back then?
We sure couldn't — but my mother did something that still feels unbelievable to me today, especially now, seeing things through the eyes of a parent myself. She sold her one-room apartment for $6,000 and gave me $3,000 of it to build my dream PC. Absolutely crazy. Unbelievable. If you're curious, you can find my full setup from back then somewhere on this page. I remember that when I received the beast, I stayed up for three straight days and nights just to try all the games — I still remember Quake II running in software mode at over 60 FPS, Hercules, and Broken Sword II.

The Pentium II was one of a kind, even in terms of looks. It had the Level 2 cache on a separate module (mounted on the same board as the CPU) and was one of the easiest CPUs to install, as it was enclosed in a SECC cartridge that simply slotted into the Slot 1 connector and was secured with two clips. Never since then have I had a sexier CPU in my PC. It really was a turning point in terms of architecture and performance. Even though it was expensive at the beginning, it helped pave the way for cheaper variants that dominated the market in the late '90s and early 2000s — I'm referring, of course, to the Celerons. AMD was way behind back then — the Pentium II could easily deliver twice the performance of an equivalent K6. And as for Cyrix... well, let's just say they were in a different league — the wrong one.

For a while, I played some of the classics on it in software mode — Quake II, Baldur's Gate, Fallout 2, or... Championship Manager 97/98 :-)
Soon after, I added a Voodoo 2 graphics card from Diamond Multimedia, which my dad brought from Canada with his per diem money :-).
At that time, I couldn't imagine that a 3D card would improve image quality as well as performance — and I was shocked when I launched Quake II, Unreal, or FIFA 98: Road to World Cup.
It was snowing on the pitch, man! After that, a lot of my friends came over to see the wonder — you had to live those days to understand the huge technological leaps we were witnessing back then... Those were the days.

My Pentium II CPU witnessed some of the greatest gaming moments I still keep in my heart: Return to Castle Wolfenstein, MDK 1 & 2, No One Lives Forever, Incubation, The Longest Journey (it had hardware acceleration!), Grim Fandango, Escape from Monkey Island, Deus Ex, Daikatana :-), Blood II, SHOGO, Oni (yep, I struggled to play Oni on this configuration) — and many, many more.

Today, I no longer have a Pentium II in my retro PCs, but I might just add one to a shelf — as a reminder of the golden age of PC gaming. ■

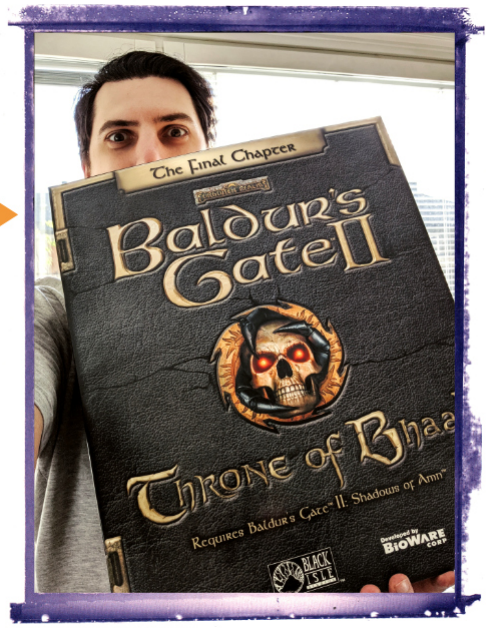
Klamath's PC specs:

Intel Pentium II 266MHz
64Mb RAM
Matrox Millenium II + Diamond Monster 3D 2 - Voodoo 2 8Mb
Creative AWE 64 Gold
CRT monitor 14 inch (I am not sure about the brand, maybe Daewoo)

COLLECTOR'S VAULT

BIO

Name: Dominus
Games: 370+ big boxes & 180+ small boxes
Favorites: Thief: The Dark Project, Heroes 3, Dungeon Keeper
Instagram: game_loaded



Why do I collect? Well, let's rewind to 1997. My parents scraped together the cash to buy me a PC — no small feat back then in Romania. A Pentium II landed on my desk, and with it, a window to a whole new world. Of course, like most kids in small cities such as Brăila, I didn't exactly have shelves full of shiny, shrink-wrapped originals. What I had was a handful of "pre-installed" games (read: pirated) — Warcraft II, Quake II, Duke Nukem 3D. Anything else I could get my hands on came from demo discs glued to the covers of gaming magazines.

Original games? Forget it. They were mythical holy grails: hard to find, and ridiculously expensive compared to a monthly salary. At best, you'd stumble across what looked like an import, but more often than not they were clever Bulgarian fakes. Case in point: a friend of a friend once sold me "legit" copies of Diablo: Hellfire and Age of Empires. Spoiler — they weren't legit. But they worked, they felt real, and I played them for countless hours with my dad. And you know what? I still have those discs today.

My first real big-box purchase came thanks to Christmas money from relatives. I sprinted to the only computer store in town. By the time I got there, one lonely wide box was left on the shelf: Heroes of Might and Magic Compendium. I'd heard the name but knew nothing else. Still, it was the only option, so I bought it as a gift to myself. Best accidental decision I ever made. I poured hours into it with my dad and friends, and I'll never forget discovering that the CDs doubled as redbook audio — an entire soundtrack you could drop into a CD player. Magic.

As the years rolled on, I learned the fine art of "convincing my parents." I told my dad (a huge Diablo fan) that Baldur's Gate was "just like Diablo, but on five CDs more." Somehow, that worked. Soon enough, big boxes of Populous 3 and Dungeon Keeper 2 followed.

Fast forward a few years, and I found myself working in the games industry — and still am today. That meant I could finally afford to buy my own games. The early 2000s were peak physical media: glossy boxes, thick manuals, and preorder goodies stuffed inside like treasures. Online shopping opened doors I never had before — suddenly I could track down the games I once only knew from magazine screenshots, demo discs, or pirated copies. This wasn't "collecting" yet. It was just me reclaiming the past. But over time, the shelves started filling. Games once dismissed as uncool became cult classics. Odd-shaped boxes and historically important releases started to catch my eye. Much, much later consoles eventually crept in too (yes, I betrayed my PC roots and bought PS1 games), but the heart of my collection has always been those old PC titles.

Working in the industry gave me the perfect excuse: "I need them for research!" I told my parents. And hey, not entirely a lie. But now, it's ▶

Quake III Arena
Realms of Arkania
Shadow Sorcerer
Rogue
Myst
Riven
Fallout
Fallout 2
Star Trail
Shiny
Gunnheer
Warcraft
Warcraft II
Warcraft III
Reign of Chaos
Collector's Edition
Blizzard

Gothic
Ultima VI
Ultima VII
Ultima Underworld
Baldur's Gate
Thief
An Industrial Revolution in World of Magic
Arcanum
Eidos

Fallout
Fallout 2
Fallout Tactics
sound-technica

Rune
Viking Warrior

Rune
Mature
M
Sarkanen's War

PC CD ROM
B.Sokal
Syberia
G8+

Stonekeep
The Official Strategy Guide
Sanitarium
Syberia
Annihilation
Dark Project
Kingdoms
CD-ROM

Lands of Lore
Might and Magic VI
Might and Magic
Millennium Edition
Redguard
Daggerfall
The Elder Scrolls
Heroes III
Heroes of Might and Magic
Dungeon Keeper
The Last Express
Battle Chess
Ice Wind Dale
Baldur's Gate II
Collector's Edition
Fallout
Tactics
Icewind Dale
Planescape
Torment
Windows 95
3DO
IBM CD-ROM

Towers of Darkness
Heretic Hexen & Beyond
Hexen
3 Classic Medieval Action Games

more than that. I collect not just to play, but to preserve. These aren't just boxes of cardboard and discs — they're slices of gaming history, each with a story, a struggle, a little miracle of its own. I've learned not to hoard everything in sight. I focus on the games I played, the ones I longed for, the oddities that stood out. Classics, cult favorites, strange misfits — anything that speaks to the history of the medium. And I try to care for them like museum pieces: safe from mold, dust, sunburn, and the slow grind of time. Along the way, I've built an Instagram archive (@game_loaded), documenting the boxes and their contents, making sure they're remembered.

I never set out to "be a collector." It just happened, one box at a time. And looking back, I realize the same thing these games taught me when I was younger: making them is hard, keeping them alive is even harder, and that's exactly why they're worth holding on to. ■

Highlights

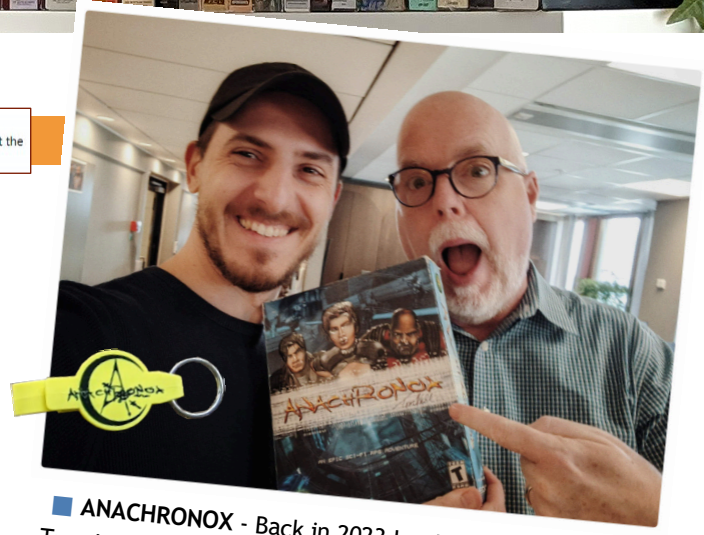
■ **DOOM II & SIGIL** - A few years ago I won a contest run by Romero Games and got a DOOM 2 big box, but John Romero's signature came later when a good friend asked him to sign my box at East European Comic Con Bucharest in 2021. The DOOM 1 mod SIGIL is still kept sealed and pristine.

■ **GRIM FANDANGO** - A rare and very collectible box - the original version of Heretic was only available through shareware registration (mail order) and contained the original three episodes and two additional episodes. The peak dark fantasy cover art is made by ma favorite artists, BROM.

■ **HERETIC Shareware** - A rare and very collectible box - the original version of Heretic was only available through shareware registration (mail order) and contained the original three episodes and two additional episodes. The peak dark fantasy cover art is made by my favorite artist, BROM.

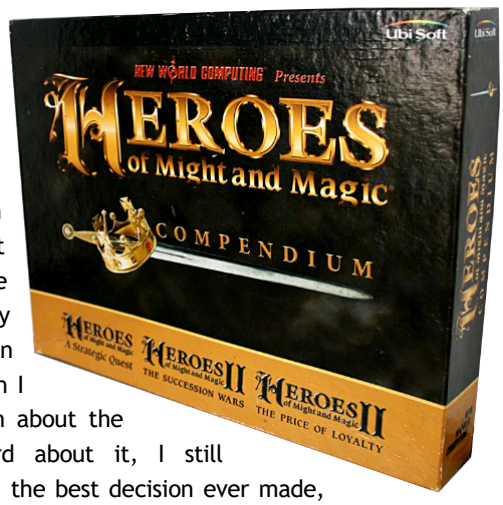
John Romero
Great find — that's a rare one! I gave away that headband during E3 1999 at the Daikatana booth. That might be a press version big box you have.

■ **DAIKATANA** - confirmed by John Romero himself, this is the press version that was given away at E3 1999, includes as special items the headband, extra demo Cds and an ION Storm decal



■ **ANACHRONOX** - Back in 2023 I as lucky enough to meet Tom Hall, he was nice to sign my box and gifted me a promotional Anachronox key chain / bottle oppener

■ **HEROES OF MIGHT & MAGIC COMPENDIUM** - this was my first big box PC game ever, bought it on Christmas of '97, it was the only game left in the only computer shop in town and although I didn't knew much about the game, only heard about it, I still decided to buy it, the best decision ever made, played it for years even after Heroes 3 was released. Hotseat playing with my dad or with my friends, pure nostalia in a box.

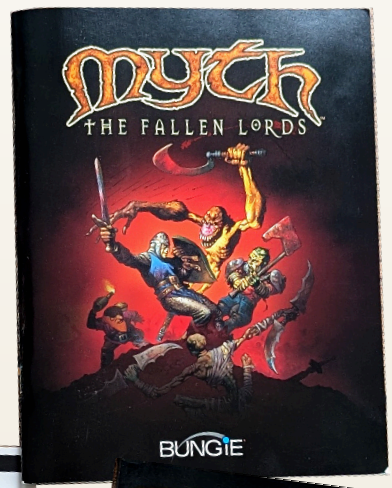


■ **QUAKE 3 ARENA** - packaged with a unique collector's metal tin. I've spent countless days playing this game at the local internet cafe in '99 when I was in highschool. One of the best multiplayer games ever made, period. Sorry Unreal Tournament. Event today I still listen to the amazing industrial soundtrack.
"QUAD DAMAGE!"

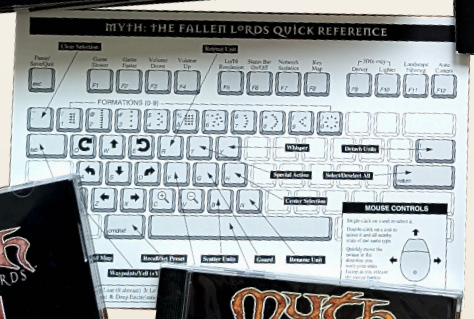
UNBOXING

Ah, **Myth: The Fallen Lords** - Bungie's glorious leap into grim, tactical real-time warfare before Halo gobbled up all the attention. The US big box was neatly packed and unlike the EU version also got an embosed cover and a gatefold. Pictured below are intems from my own collection. I am missing the registration/waranty card and the game catalog flyer. Some versions also included a demo disc for other games, depending on the retailer but the standard US release focused on these core items.

A glorious, chunky big box with embossed art on the cover and gatefold opening revealing more screens and information about the game.



The printed manual - Not just instructions, but a grim little tome of lore. It set the tone with dark fiction, unit backgrounds, and a war-torn atmosphere



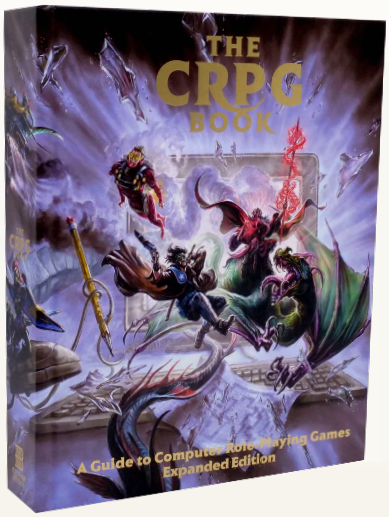
A handy fold-out sheet with hotkeys, commands, and controls.

The sountrack CD was sold separately

Game CD-ROM - The core of it all. Containes the full game on one CD

The official strategy guide from Sybex was not included in the game box but available as a separate purchase.

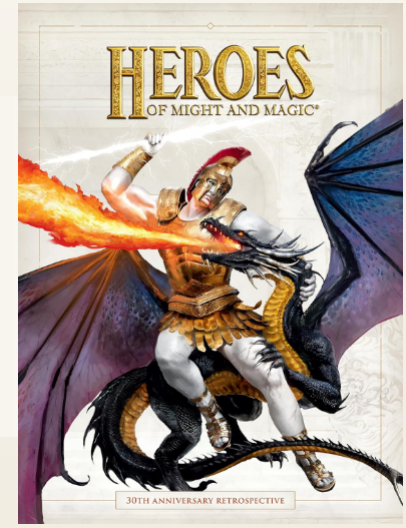
RECOMMENDED READING



The CRPG Book Expanded Edition

This is probably the ultimate guide to computer role-playing games! The Expanded Edition is nothing short of a heroic quest in printed form: a sprawling, lovingly compiled guide through decades of computer role-playing history. Edited by Felipe Pepe and contributed to by a legion of fans, journalists, and developers, it charts the rise of the genre from Wizardry and Ultima through to modern giants. Each entry blends sharp summaries, screenshots, and personal anecdotes, making it feel less like an encyclopedia and more like a campfire story shared by fellow adventurers. The expanded edition adds even more titles, updated context, and rare gems that might have slipped under your radar. Beyond the reviews, essays tackle broader themes: worldbuilding, combat systems, the evolution of storytelling. With its sheer scope and passion, it's an essential artifact for anyone who has ever rolled dice, min-maxed stats, or lost a weekend to a dungeon crawl.

Heroes of Might and Magic: 30th Anniversary



When New World Computing released the original Heroes of Might and Magic in 1995, players were elated to take control of bold heroes who led vast armies composed of creatures from modest peasants to fearsome Black Dragons. In the decades that followed, the games have only become more ambitious, featuring thrilling narratives, unforgettable art, and iconic gameplay. Now, readers can learn the secrets behind the development of each main game in the definitive turn-based strategy series through never-before seen art, documentation, and interviews with key members of the creative teams. The Heroes of Might and Magic: 30th Anniversary Retrospective takes fans of fantasy, turn-based strategy, and nostalgic gaming on an expansive expedition down the heroes" path and beyond.

The Sumerian Game
A Digital Resurrection

For those wanting a deep dive in the history and restoration of the Sumerian Game, Andrea Contato has released a book, written with passion after years of research and investigation, it tells the story of "The Sumerian Game", the people behind its development, how it worked, known versions, and its modern reconstruction. A fascinating journey into both gaming history and the process of investigating and digitally restoring a long lost game! The book is available on Andrea's website at www.andreacontato.com

The Sumerian Game – the ancestor of all strategy, management, and city simulation games, one of the earliest and most influential computer games – was heavily researched and digitally restored by Andrea Contato. Now it is playable on Steam for free: https://store.steampowered.com/app/2699250/The_Sumerian_Game - A must try for anyone with a passion for video and computer game history!

SOUNDTRACK

Age of Empires – Music From The Ages

■ Recorded and mixed by **Stephen Rippy**, **David Rippy**, and **Kevin McMullan**, the music has a lovely ancient sound capitalizing on old instruments like drums and wood winds.

■ The music from these albums is game music from AoE 1, AoE 2 and their expansions. So if you have the games in their original CDs, you won't miss anything (no new tracks, just some with different namese). The only exception is the "*Ages Compilation Soundtrack*" included in AoE: Collector's Edition, which has a modern mix of the AoE main theme as its last track.

■ There were more songs produced for the game than what could fit on the CD, and as such some of the tracks that didn't fit on the CD were used in the separate MIDI track which was used if you didn't have the game CD inserted in your CD drive. A few of these were slightly remixed and then eventually saw the light of the day as full CD quality on the *Age of Empires: The Rise of Rome*. Because the game uses CD audio you can actually just put the CD into your CD player to listen to it. Just skip the first track which is the program.

MYTH The Fallen Lords

■ Composed, produced and performed by **Martin O'Donnell** and **Michael Salvatori** with narration by **Geoffrey Charlton-Perrin**.

■ The nineteen tracks set the mood for each level of the game, and are alternately haunting, thrilling, mournful and triumphant as they present the story of the living races' struggle against the Fallen Lords. The songs have an airy depth to them and shift between mystical and dark moods, making use of strings and simple arrangements. This is definetly one of my favourite albums, the music delivers the epic story of the game. Soundtracks like this are a testament to the gravity of music in games and interactive entertainment in general.

■ **Myth: Total Soundtrack** was release later in 1999 and includes the music of both Myth 1 and Myth 2 on one CD.

"Warlords AI not only blows away the immediate fantasy-based competition, but other strategic wargames as well." -PC Games

"For this gaming series, third times a charm!" -PC Gamer

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REIGN OF HEROES

"Warlords III pushes the envelope forward for turn-based games — especially for internet play." -Computer Gaming World

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Struggle against computer opponents whose AI monitors your every tendency and plots elaborate strategies against you and your allies.

Hordes of the Undead overrun the Selentine Empire, leaving utter devastation in their wake. From the ashes, a powerful new reign of heroes arises to contend for power and build a new empire. Arrayed against zombies, elementals and other unspeakables, you must arrange alliances, cast horrific spells, and lead your armies to victory... or be crushed beneath the enemy's merciless heel.

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